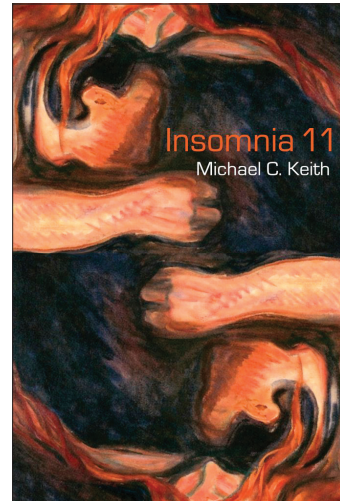


Insomnia 11
Michael C. Keith
MadHat
Cambridge, MA
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\$21.95



Review by Zvi A. Sesling

Michael C. Keith is a quintessential flash/micro fiction writer. For the most part readers of the genre want quick fulfilling reads. They do not want to be tied down with several characters and hundreds of pages before arriving at the conclusion. What readers do want is to make the ordinary every day into the memorable and often with a surprise. Keith has written enough fiction, particularly in the flash/micro genre to deliver. His writing is tight, brief, and never repetitive. Readers familiar with Keith's stories know the expected is often unexpected.

In Ted Kooser's book on writing poetry the former United States Poetry Laureate makes three points about poetry. First, it is communication, second, it is for the reader and third, there are no rules. In Keith's *Insomnia 11* these specifically apply to his writing.

First, Keith is directly communicating with readers through his brief stories. Second, his writing is for the readers' enjoyment and third, despite those who say the genre has rules, Keith often does not follow rules to the betterment of his stories.

In a review of David Galef's *Brevity, A Flash Fiction Handbook*, in the *Los Angeles Times* Sean Hooks notes, "Despite its diminutive size, flash fiction is not one note. It can incorporate elements of noir and feminism, film, and theater. Flash fiction is something different from just a short story writ small. Flash fiction, while not shallow, does not draw the reader into the proverbial deep end. With flash fiction, the mood is direct, even directive. Decisiveness is key." This exemplifies Keith's stories.

Put another way, in his introduction to *Fissures, A Collection of a Hundred 100-word Stories*, author Grant Faulkner explains that the book is a "bag full of shards", each one capturing the small, telling moments of existence.

So it is with Keith. His bag is full of shards. Some stories are two lines while others may be long paragraphs. Some of his stories are science fiction, taking the reader to places they have not been, often displaying the author's sardonic humor. His cleverness often brings a smile. Whatever the story the ending usually not what the reader expects or guesses.

Some stories might be autobiographical as in "Interview Gaff" in which Keith writes: "I asked Joyce Carol Oates if she were an alien because of her extraordinary literary output (not to mention appearance, I

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

thought to myself). Of course, I was just trying to break the ice, since I was nervous, and she looked like she didn't want to be there. Unfortunately, she ended the exchange in a huff, saying, "Did they ask Shakespeare the same thing?"

It is possible this event occurred as did some other stories in this extremely entertaining volume. In fact the reader is often left to wonder if a story is fact or a gem from the fertile mind of a habitual writer such as a crossover humorous/sci-fi piece titled "Decoded". Here Keith takes fact – the Voynich Manuscript – and mixes in his unique sense of humor:

"Members of the Academy of Cryptographers were skeptical about a theory put forth by famous Romanian chef Vasile Bordelanu claiming the ancient Voynich Manuscript – long a subject of great mystery and exhaustive investigation – was simply a compilation of recipes for Gypsy cabbage rolls."

There is also a mystery in the title of the book, *Insomnia 11*. What is the secret to the title and beyond? What is the significance of 11:11? It is a puzzlement for readers to solve. Is it another Michael Keith story within his stories?

Keith is a master storyteller with a vivid imagination and an often wonderfully bizarre sense of humor. Even the shortest of the stories draws in the reader and has them thinking deeply about what they just read. When people finished *Insomnia 11* they will want to put it on their bookshelf in a special space so it can be reread. All of Keith's fiction books are worth reading while the two flash/micro fiction books which preceded *Insomnia 11*, *Let Us Now Speak Of Extinction* and *Stories in the Key of Me* help make a trilogy of fascinating reading.