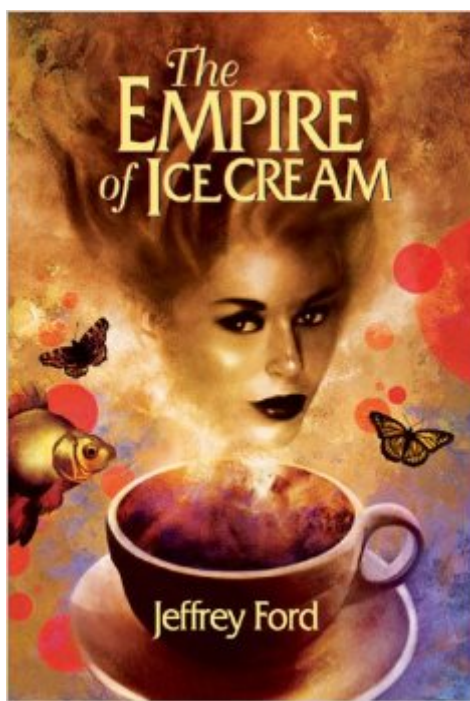


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The Empire Of Ice Cream



Synopsis

Mixing the mundane with the metaphysical, the pairings of the everyday and the extraordinary in this collection of short fiction yield supernatural results; a young musician perceives another world while drinking coffee, a fairy chronicles his busy life in a sandcastle during the changing tide, a demonic 16th-century chess set shows up in a New Jersey bar, and Charon, the boatman of hell, takes a few days vacation. Storylines both conventional and outlandish reveal humdrum routines as menacing, or imaginary worlds as perfectly familiar. Allusions to authors such as Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne reinforce the fantasy tradition in these tales, while understated humor and moments of sadness add a quirky unpredictability. Also included is the previously unpublished novella, "Botch Town," a coming-of-age story about a boy on Long Island whose family and friends live ordinary lives under threats both real and imagined. Each story is followed by a brief afterword that details its genesis.

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Customer Reviews

Jeffrey Ford has made quite an impression in the last few years, with several fine novels including the World Fantasy Award winning *The Physiognomy*, *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque*, and *The Girl in the Glass*. But my favorite Ford works have been short fiction -- and it so happens that my personal favorites appear in this new collection, his second. The title story, indeed, is one of my favorite stories by anyone from the last few years. My interest was immediately engaged by the Wallace Stevens reference, though Ford, in his introduction, disclaims any intention of alluding to

Stevens' great poem. The story is about a man with synesthesia. He becomes an accomplished piano player and composer, even as he perceives the notes he plays or composes as sights or smells or tastes. Somehow coffee ice cream causes a special hallucination: a young woman. As he grows older, he finds that pure coffee allows real contact with this woman, and he learns that she, too, is an artist and a synesthaesiatic. The story climaxes as he tries to complete a major musical composition -- coming to a predictable but still quite satisfying and moving conclusion. Another brilliant piece is "The Weight of Words." This suggests that the placement and appearance of words can affect their meaning in such mundane ways as subliminal advertising, or such more profound ways as causing death, love, or the appreciation of beauty. It's told by a man who has lost his wife and hopes to regain her by the use of weighted word -- instead he gains something quite different. There is one new story in the book, a very long novella (nearly novel length): "Botch Town". This is a pitch perfect and rather sad evocation of childhood in a lower middle class New Jersey suburb. The title refers to a model town that the narrator's brother constructs in his basement -- somehow their sister, who is in some way brilliant but not very comprehensible, seems to use this town to reflect real happenings in their own town, including the whereabouts of a mysterious visitor who may be connected with the disappearance of a neighborhood boy. There are many other jewels here. "The Annals of Eelin-Ok" is a tender, bittersweet, story of a Twilmish, a creature that colonizes a sand castle and lives only until the castle is washed away. "The Beautiful Gelreesh" is quite different in mood, a sardonic piece about a doglike creature with a rather extreme means of curing depression. "A Night at the Tropics" concerns a cursed chess set and the bully who stumbles into possession of it. The story is framed in a very Kiplingesque manner: the narrator, named Ford, tells of his return to his childhood house, and a visit to a bar his father frequented, "The Tropics." It is there that he again encounters the bully, and hears the tale of the chess set. And, much as Kipling so often and so brilliantly managed, the frame ends up blending with and enhancing the central story. (And, to my relief after Ford's denial of the Stevens reference in "The Empire of Ice Cream," his introduction here explicitly acknowledges Kipling's influence.) I won't mention the other stories, but I'll say that they are a varied and intriguing lot. The book itself is a lovely physical object, as we expect from Golden Gryphon. And Ford's introductions are fairly brief but very interesting, definitely significant value added. This is surely one of the best story collections of the year.

I'd seen a dramatic reading of "The Annals of Eelin-Ok" (one of the stories in this collection), an experience that has stuck with me much longer than most dramatic productions... Mr. Ford does not profess to be a playwright (yet), but he writes with SO much immediacy, whatever is happening in

his stories is so important to his characters, that you get sucked into the stories very quickly - what is important to those characters now becomes important to you, too. I'm currently enjoying very much his earlier THE FANTASY WRITER'S ASSISTANT collection of stories, and look forward to re-visiting "The Annals of Eelin-Ok" in this volume, as well as discovering the accompanying tales. To be transported into his stories is a very gratifying experience. Who'd have thought that a dramatic reading about the sprites/spirits that inhabit sandcastles between low and high tides could become an epic tale, full of romance, action, and contemplation on life itself? And all the while having you on the edge of your seat? I've seen a lot of theatre, and wish more of it was an engaging experience as the work of this non-playwright.

The Empire Of Ice Cream by Jeffrey Ford is an impressively engaging collection of fourteen of the author's most evocative and best crafted short stories. Intertwining fantasy, reality, the straight-up peculiar, The Empire Of Ice Cream showcases: The Annals of Eelin-Ok, Jupiter's Skull, A Night in the Tropics, The Beautiful Gelreesh, Boatman's Holiday, Botch Town, A Man of Light, The Green Word, Giant Land, Coffins on the River, Summer Afternoon, The Weight of Words, The Trentino Kid, and the title piece, The Empire of Ice Cream. With a conclusive analysis and detailing of each story in the form of an author note, The Empire Of Ice Cream is confidently recommended to fantasy enthusiasts, as well as (and most particularly) to those who have not yet discovered the literary talent and storytelling style of Jeffrey Ford.

Despite its award winning status, the title of this anthology led me to believe it was either young adult oriented or in the vein of the recent plethora of updated fairy tale collections. I was very pleased to find I was wrong. Jeffrey Ford is a highly intelligent, clever wordsmith that more closely resembles Bradbury and Wolfe than the Datlow/Windling crowd. Like his unstable scholar's work in "The Weight of Words", Ford's writings are greater than the sum of their parts. In particular, I'd like to praise the novella, "Botch Town." As soon as I was a few paragraphs into it, I recognized the familiar territory of the "remember the year when..." stories by Bradbury, King, et al, that I enjoy so much. The autobiographical tone was convincing, and the characters were universal and believable. My friends and I had our own version of Mr. Blah Blah, and our own Halloween hijinx were remarkably similar to those described within. (I also appreciated the subtle nod to Spike Jones fans.) Among my other favorites are the darkly humorous "Boatman's Holiday" and the surreal tour-de-force, "Giant Land." If you're looking for a collection of substantial, sophisticated yet accessible, stick-to-your-ribs short fiction, then pick up The Empire of Ice Cream.

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