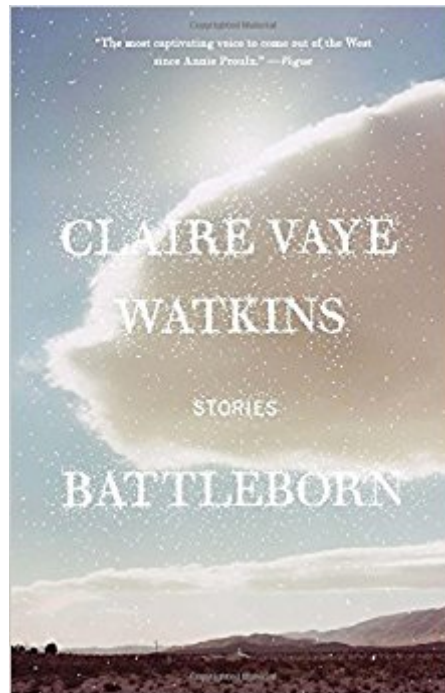




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# Battleborn: Stories



## Synopsis

The extraordinary debut collection from the Guggenheim Award-winning author of the forthcoming *Gold Fame Citrus* • Winner of the 2012 Story Prize Recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters 2013 Rosenthal Family Foundation Award Named one of the National Book Foundation's "5 Under 35" fiction writers of 2012 Winner of New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award NPR Best Short Story Collections of 2012 A Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle, and Time Out New York Best Book of the year, and more . . . Like the work of Cormac McCarthy, Denis Johnson, Richard Ford, and Annie Proulx, *Battleborn* represents a near-perfect confluence of sensibility and setting, and the introduction of an exceptionally powerful and original literary voice. In each of these ten unforgettable stories, Claire Vaye Watkins writes her way fearlessly into the mythology of the American West, utterly reimagining it. Her characters orbit around the region's vast spaces, winning redemption despite - and often because of - the hardship and violence they endure. The arrival of a foreigner transforms the exchange of eroticism and emotion at a prostitution ranch. A prospecting hermit discovers the limits of his rugged individualism when he tries to rescue an abused teenager. Decades after she led her best friend into a degrading encounter in a Vegas hotel room, a woman feels the aftershock. Most bravely of all, Watkins takes on her own troubled legacy in a story that emerges from the mayhem and destruction of *Helter Skelter*. Arcing from the sweeping and sublime to the minute and personal, from Gold Rush to ghost town to desert to brothel, the collection echoes not only in its title but also in its fierce, undefeated spirit the motto of her home state.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2012 Story Prize  
Recipient of a 2014 Guggenheim Award  
Recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters 2013 Rosenthal Family Foundation Award  
Named one of the National Book Foundation's "5 Under 35" fiction writers of 2012  
Winner of New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award  
NPR Best Short Story Collections of 2012  
A Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle, and Time Out New York Best Book of the year, and more . . .

"A real treat" | Through remarkably assured writing that manages to be both bristly and brittle, Watkins chronicles despair and loneliness, catalogs valiant fights for survival and desperate pleas to be heard, and every time has us rooting for her underdogs.

San Francisco Chronicle "Dazzling."

O, The Oprah Magazine "Although individual stories stand alone, together they tell the tale of a place, and of the population that thrives and perishes therein" | The historical sits comfortably alongside the contemporary and the factual nicely supplements the fictional

Readers will share in the environs of the author and her characters, be taken into the hardship of a pitiless place and emerge on the other side • wiser, warier and weathered like the landscape.

Antonya Nelson, The New York Times Book Review "The most captivating voice to come out of the West since Annie Proulx - though it's too early Joan Didion that [Watkins] bears comparison for her arid humor and cut-to-the-chase knowingness."

Vogue "The most exciting book of fiction I read this past year" | To me, her gift is akin to that of those rare actors, like a Streep or a Brando, who can totally become a character but retain their own essence through and through

Fantastic stuff.

Chang-rae Lee, A Year in Reading, The Millions "Exceptional" | A writer of great precision and greater restraint, Watkins is a natural storyteller whose material enriches that gift rather than engulfing it

One doesn't have to be from the Battleborn state to recognize and appreciate literature that resonates like this.

The Rumpus "[A] breathtaking debut" | [Watkins'] stories carry the weight and devastation of entire novels.

Flavorpill "Absorbing" | [Battleborn's] true setting is a Faulknerian desert of the heart, where the soil is cursed by its precious metals and one's personal history can be just as toxic. Clear-eyed and nimble in parsing the lives of her Westerners, one of Watkins's strengths is not dodging that the simple fact that love can be tragic, involving, as it does, humans so flawed, so often tender and yet incapable.

The Boston Globe "A powerful new

voice that deserves recognition. [Watkins maps] a regional portrait while pausing for detailed sketches, with a strong perspective that blends the romanticized past of Larry McMurtry, heartbreaking characters of Annie Proulx, and bleak timeless landscapes of Cormac McCarthy.

The Onion AV Club "As if Watkins' prose embodies the desert landscape of Nevada itself, the stories are stony, unkind, and harsh, though never unattractive. Beneath these confessions runs a spiritual undertow that salvific beauty can arise when brutality is brought to light. All of her stories left me feeling purged and oddly cleansed, easily making *Battleborn* one of the strongest collections I've read in years.

The Millions "Her incredible talent fills every page of this raw, wild, soaring debut. She may be the coolest real-life literary lady we've discovered in quite a while."

Flavorwire "As grounded as they are in real places, the stories are fictions, crafted with the skill of an artisan, working from the starting points of Mary Gaitskill and Aimee Bender.

Los Angeles Times "These stories are as spare and beautifully austere as the landscape of the American Southwest where they are set, the same landscape that shapes and hardens the characters and refines them down to their fundamental elements, working them until they are all sinewy muscle and steely resolve. This is a stunning debut from an important young writer, and if it is a promise of what's to come in the future of American fiction, we are in very good hands indeed."

Bookriot "Vibrant and assured. The settings of Watkins' home state evoke with craft that echoes Cormac McCarthy or Richard Ford were the perfect settings for heartbreak."

Time Out New York "What distinguishes Watkins' work is her command of time. Nearly all the stories are set in the present, but her characters constantly live with aftereffects of the past. They're not simply "scarred" by history; they're irradiated by it, queasily lit from within."

Minneapolis Star-Tribune "[An] assured debut. Here's hoping Watkins will continue to delve into Nevada's unsound caverns and emerge with such worthy plunder."

Dallas Morning News "Gloriously vivid stories about the human heart."

Kirkus "In her debut short story collection *Battleborn* Claire Vaye Watkins marries character to landscape as well as anyone I have read in years. These stories set in the Nevada desert are gritty and brilliant, and foretell an auspicious literary future for their author."

Largehearted Boy "A coolly impressive new voice of the American West."

The Financial Times "The people in *Battleborn* aren't characters in stories, but human beings perpetually yearning for warmth. Entering the varied lives is akin to watching a tightrope walker high overhead, moving with steady confidence without a net. Watkins writes

with precision and care, the sentences themselves as surprising as the events, the dialogue, and the spare description. "There is a purity to the prose that is a constant pleasure to read. There is great originality in these narratives. But the generosity and personal sacrifices of the people are as universal as the stars at night." —Chris Offutt, *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) "Readers... will find much to admire in this arresting collection, which one hopes is merely the first stop along the way for a writer who deserves a sustained literary life." —*Library Journal* (starred review) "A fresh, fierce, fabulous collection. Watkins writes like the divine Didion—cool and clean with not a word wasted. Where, I'd she come from? I'm glad she's here." —Joy Williams, author of *The Quick and The Dead* "Claire Vaye Watkins is never, ever satisfied with the ordinary. Each story in this brilliant debut surprises. Watkins offers us amazing visions of a funny, savage, haunted West—and one of the most outstanding short story collections in recent memory." —Christopher Coake, author of *We're in Trouble and You Came Back*

Claire Vaye Watkins is the author of *Battleborn*, winner of the Story Prize, the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Silver Pen Award from the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. *Battleborn* was named a Best Book of 2012 by the San Francisco Chronicle, Boston Globe, Time Out New York, and Flavorwire, and a Best Short Story Collection by NPR.org. In 2012, the National Book Foundation named Claire one of the 5 Best Writers Under 35. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Granta*, *One Story*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, *Best of the West 2011*, *Best of the Southwest 2013*, and elsewhere. A graduate of the University of Nevada Reno and the Ohio State University, Claire has received fellowships from the Writers' Conferences at Sewanee and Bread Loaf. An assistant professor at Bucknell University, Claire is also the co-director, with Derek Palacio, of the Mojave School, a free creative writing workshop for teenagers in rural Nevada.

One of the reasons I'm drawn to fiction set in the West is that the good stuff, the really good stuff, brings this part of the world to life. It is a vivid, harsh, beautiful place that rarely nurtures but often rewards anyone who can handle it. Many of the characters can handle it in Claire Vaye Watkins's brilliant stories in *Battleborn*, which are set in Nevada and Northern California. They just don't know they can handle it until circumstances point it out to them abruptly. That's certainly the case in "The Last Thing We Need". Thomas Grey, who lives out in the Middle of Nowhere, finds the debris of what may have been a wreck and writes to the man whose name and address he finds on some

prescription bottles. Even though he has a wife and two children, he lives mostly with his thoughts. And, because the man he is writing to has not answered, Thomas Grey begins to relay his thoughts: "This is our old joke. Like all our memories, we like to take it out once in a while and lay it flat on the kitchen table, the way my wife does with her sewing patterns, where we line up the shape of our life against that which we thought it would be by now." "I'll tell you what I don't tell her, that there is something shameful in this, the buoying of our sinking spirits with old stories." And later: "On second thought, perhaps sometimes these things are best left by the side of the road, as it were. Sometimes a person wants a part of you that's no good. Sometimes love is a wound that opens and closes, opens and closes, all our lives." Grey finds out that there is something he cares very much about besides the past. He can handle where he is and what he has. Other characters need to leave to reach that epiphany. One leaves a brother to his own devices after his sibling is enthralled by something else out in the land where gold was hunted and where gamblers still believe they will come out on top. Another has been depending on her sister and reaches a point where, perhaps, her sister can now depend on her. Others are not so successful. Not all attempts by the men to be heroic succeed, as one old-time miner discovers. Not all attempts by the women to let go of the past succeed. For all of them, the men and the women, the ones who thrive and the ones who barely survive, promises matter. In a story, "The Diggings", set during the Gold Rush, a 49'er explains: "A promise unkept will take a man's mind. It does not matter whether the promise is made by a woman or a territory or a future foretold. ... Because though I was afraid and angry and lonesome much of the time, I was also closer to my own raw heart there in the territory than I have ever been since."

There is a bit of a formula to writing short stories, especially of the more modern variety, say last fifty years or so. You take personal details, be they landscape or family history or both, and apply them to an exploration of the human condition. That is to say, you see how humanity, as the author sees it, would react to the experiences you have had, at least in variation, and/or in the places you experienced them. The trick, which Claire Vaye Watkins has taken to quite well as I see it, is to create unique characters through which to explore this. In that way it becomes more insightful, more distant and yet more real, because we can set ourselves apart a bit as the reader, and say that while the act may be abhorrent or terrifying emotionally, that is how that character must act in order to cope. It is only later, in contemplating, that we are able to see ourselves in the humanity of it all. Watkins is able to trick us into seeing ourselves in a new light, whether it was her intent or not. This short story collection shows us a link between unique madams, murderous cults and even peafowl that explains a history not seen in academic books of that genre. She explains the history of learned

reaction and interaction against a backdrop where little else can distract you from it. That is not to say the Nevada starkness is not hauntingly beautiful and present, but you cannot help but see the fine details carved into the varied characters when they play against such an open canvas, like a play in black-box theater.

graphic modern fiction set in watkins' home state of nevada. watkins' father spent some time with the manson family, until he fled the colony and moved to nevada. i purchased this book to read that one story she wrote about that period in her life, but the rest of the book contains stories that, in my opinion, were just as good. a few were so horrifying, they were better, IMHO. the settings are stark, and some of the topics are disturbing, to say the least. some of the stories, particularly that of two innocent tourists who accompany some boys to a hotel room are horrifying. watkins can write characters whose personalities are as diverse as the las vegas population. i found watkins' stories tense and page-turning, and i would compare her to jon raymond, or virginia beach's mark richards. of all the modern fiction i've discovered, this collection is among the best. it's not for the faint of heart, but worth every minute of your time.

I just graduated from college with a Bachelors of Arts in Photojournalism but my minor was Creative Writing, this book was assigned for the final class of my minor "Elements of Craft" where we read different fiction novels and collections and assessed the craft of the author's work. I am not a fiction person. I will admit that immediately, but wow, I am obsessed with this book. I'm still 100 pages shy of finishing it, but so far the 5ish stories I've read have blown me away. I never knew fiction could be so good. I've been recommending this book to everyone who will listen. And so far everyone's seemed very interested in it. I've had multiple requests to borrow my book, but I'm too scared to part with it for fear I won't get it back. This one is definitely staying in my library!

Although I don't usually read short stories, I purchased this collection because I enjoyed Watkins' other book, "Gold Fame Citrus." In short: this collection is fantastic and arguably better than Gold Fame Citrus. I could try and fail to describe why the collection is so good (well written, imaginative, extremely different viewpoints and styles from story to story), but one thing I found interesting is that Watkins manages to end most of the stories on a philosophical note without seeming pretentious or preachy, which is somewhat amazing considering how often other authors try the same approach and fail.

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