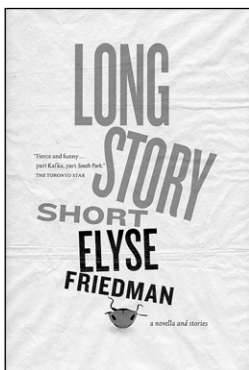

A Dark Collection

Long Story Short's black humour rings true

A novella and a scattering of sardonic stories filled with black humour and a desire to look lightly underneath the surface of things make up *Long Story Short*, this new collection by Toronto author Elyse Friedman. Friedman's descriptive writing is confident with a strong voice and her dialogue unapologetically honest. She has a knack for pinning down some of the more awkward emotions and for uncovering the balance between what one says and does and what one thinks. The themes are decidedly offbeat and quirky (described in the *Toronto Star* as "part Kafka, part *South Park*") and her characters are unsure, stressed, irresponsible. In short, *Long Story* is a melancholic balance between the odd, the ugly and the sublime.

"Truth" is a story about a first-date encounter in which all the spoken dialogue consists of the horrifyingly honest thoughts you might be thinking on such a date. For example: "Listen," said Martin, "my self-esteem will be temporarily boosted if I get you into bed tonight, and that waitress is making me horny. Why don't we go to my place?" Leslie mulled it over. "Why not? I



have masochistic inclinations and I'm feeling destructive." It's hilarious but painful at the same time. Friedman paints a picture of real

Long Story Short

by Elyse Friedman

House of Anansi, 214 pages, \$29.95

people, caricatured by their thoughts. The humour is certainly dark: "Truth" openly and roughly deals with the realities of insincerity, lust and low self-esteem. But dark as it may be, it really is funny.

Later, she writes about a woman who was raised in a strangely sheltered world now forced to change her lifestyle after her mother dies. With a light touch, "Lost Kitten" adeptly unravels the story of this woman who lives the only life she has ever known and honours her mother's memory by inhabiting the apartment they had always dreamed of living in together. The story is an interesting look at how the surface does not always tell the whole story and also that there are multiple ways to look at something. What can be thought of as tragic can also be thought of as beautiful; a sublime life is a life that was never allowed to be anything more.

The novella, "A Bright Tragic Thing," is about a pair of teenage boys about to graduate who have a strange addiction to gathering lesser-celebrity memorabilia. Dave and Todd collect things like old shoes, signed posters and anything else they can con out of so-called sidekick celebs by any means necessary. Their bizarre habit spirals out of control when a has-been alcoholic actor latches onto Dave, thinking him to be a true fan. Friedman's portrayal of the middle-aged, self-destructing man is sadly realistic. It's a cringingly funny story in which the protagonist tiptoes through a mess of his own making. Also dealing with the usual coming-of-age issues, it could perhaps be a dark sequel to *Superbad*.

—Matt J. Simmons