

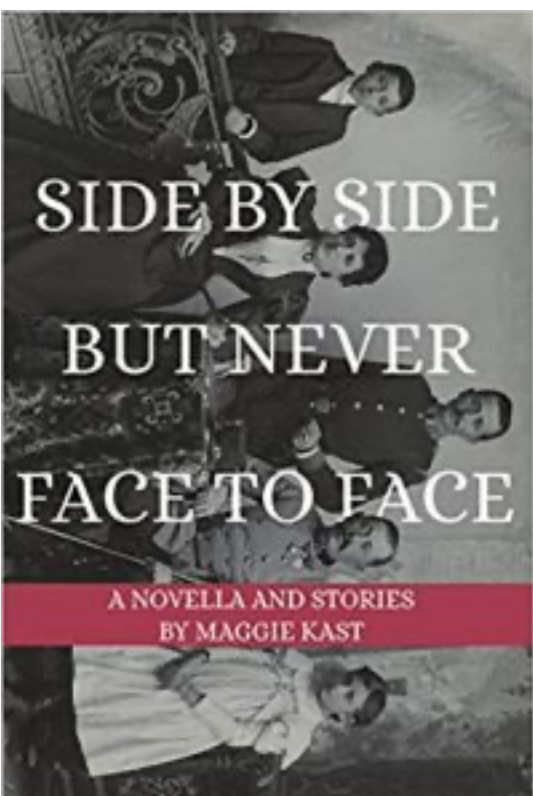
BOOK REVIEWS

Side by Side but Never Face to Face

About the Book

- **Author:** Maggie Kast
- **Reviewed By:** Elizabeth Boyle
- **Genre:** [Fiction](#)
- **Publisher:** [Orison Books](#)
- **Published:** 2020
- **Pages:** 186

Book Review



There is personal history to be found in Maggie Kast’s collection *Side by Side but Never Face to Face*. Kast’s stories, to be clear, are works of fiction. But they are also, as described by author Rosellen Brown, “adjacent to fact.” Kast’s website supports this description. From it, visitors learn that she is a dancer and choreographer. That she lost her three-year-old daughter in a car accident. That, in the years following, she joined the Catholic Church. That after her husband passed away, she began writing. And that she continues to work in the performing arts as a board member of Links Hall in Chicago. Greta, the central character in the stories of *Side by Side but Never Face to Face*, is, likewise, a dancer and choreographer, a wife and mother. She is a woman grieving the three-year-old daughter she lost in a car accident and the husband she loses to colon cancer. She is also a converted Catholic and a Chicagoan.

To what extent Kast’s stories are true—as in factual—we don’t know. But in *Side by Side but Never Face to Face*, adjacency to fact is perhaps most interesting to consider as a question of form. At times, Kast’s stories read more as fiction and at other times as nonfiction. In certain passages, deference is given to drama and metaphor, to the lurking discovered truth in fiction, and in other passages, to experience and observation. While this tension can sometimes be unsettling, it is effective in drawing attention to the central question of the collection. That is, how we, as humans, deal in the “the nature of the real,” how we accept and inhabit the present while longing for and needing more: what has been lost, those who are not there, the revelation of what, in the end, all this life is “about.”

Side by Side but Never Face to Face is Kast’s first collection, though she has also published a memoir, *The Crack Between the Worlds*, and the novel *A Free, Unsullied Land*. The collection consists of seven linked short stories and the titular novella. Together these resilient, honest pieces span two continents and cover more than a century of political and familial history. While Greta eventually emerges as the anchor character, the first third of the collection belongs largely to Manfred, her husband. The opening story, “The Cry of the Patoos,” about a 1977 car crash in Jamaica, is told from his point of view, as are the early stories “To March With,” set in 1930s Austria before the Anschluss, and “So You Won’t Have To,” set in the ’80s in a Chicago hospital. The last two short stories, “Joyful Noise” and “No Pity,” are Greta’s, but focus on Greta as a caretaker of her son, Allen, who has a developmental disability.

It isn’t until the novella that the collection becomes Greta’s, and even in this piece she shares the narrative point of view with Hal, her psychiatrist. Set largely in Chicago and Door County, Wisconsin, the novella covers Greta’s conversion to Catholicism, her sessions with Hal, and, years later, her and Hal’s separate visits to the Door Peninsula, an area where the Hmong have settled—a people who have at times been scorned by other Door residents for their spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. In this way, the novella builds upon and brings to light one of the major connective threads of the collection: the idea of otherness, and how, as the title suggests, we tend to pass through life alongside people without truly knowing or seeing them.

Greta’s own desire to know people functions throughout as a gentle counterexample of this tendency, even as she becomes increasingly comfortable with her own independence and individual identity. Connection grounded in independence may seem counterintuitive, but by telling Greta’s story, Kast suggests otherwise. “Rather,” Kast writes, “[Greta] found that difference in itself could strip away the vanities, revealing what makes people human.” Greta’s lifelong search for understanding and connection is also the moving force behind one of the other compelling threads in the collection: the relationship between human desire and spiritual longing, as seen especially from the female eye.

If the forward movement toward both independence and communion tells one story in this collection, the destabilizing jumps in place and time tell another: how tragedy, grief, and loss can skew our perception of reality. How everything that came before tragedy and everything that comes after can swirl together, creating a nonlinear experience of being. “How could something that happened so fast be taking so long?” Manfred asks, near the end of his struggle with cancer, a question that, taken generally, persists throughout the collection.

But Kast’s layered stories also read as the type of work you might come back to days, months, years later and, each time, understand differently. From another angle, the stories in *Side by Side but Never Face to Face* seem less to assemble themselves around questions of suffering than of joy. Kast’s engagement with these more philosophical or spiritual questions, regardless of their origin, is also where the collection tends to lean into the nonfiction form. In the novella, for instance, Greta often finds herself ruminating on the relationship between the surface and depth of things, considering appearance and essence in a manner that brings to mind works such as Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*. On one such occasion, Greta, in conversation with Conor, a writer she meets at a folk school in Door County, entertains the following thoughts:

If no “about,” she thought, and words give useless pleasure, she might wake up to the “what” of things. She thought of Gertrude Stein’s lament that words like “moon” and “mountain” no longer gave one moon or mountain. It seemed that Conor’s way of thinking loosened up the too-tight fit between worn-out words and things, giving her new paths to things themselves, the kind of paths that open up the nature of the real. That was Hal’s problem, she thought now. He thought he could access the real with microscope or knife, when actually the “what-ness” of a rock was as mysterious as the “who-ness” of a person. The possibility of such direct, unmediated vision made her shiver.

As a dancer and writer, Kast would know as well as anyone about the limits of language—how so much more can be expressed with “physical grammar” than with words. For Greta, accepting such limitations, and similarly the limitations of human understanding, is an act of healing. In this respect, *Side by Side but Never Face to Face*, published during a year of particular and overwhelming loss, feels especially relevant. One might even say that this is a collection about acceptance—about coming to terms with the real world we inhabit. And yet, the idea of acceptance, riddled with reluctant connotation, sometimes betrays itself. For Kast, anyway, there is still this book, these words. There are still these stories. Beautiful stories, whomever they may belong to.



Previous The Voice of Sheila Chandra	Next Silence Is My Mother Tongue
---	---