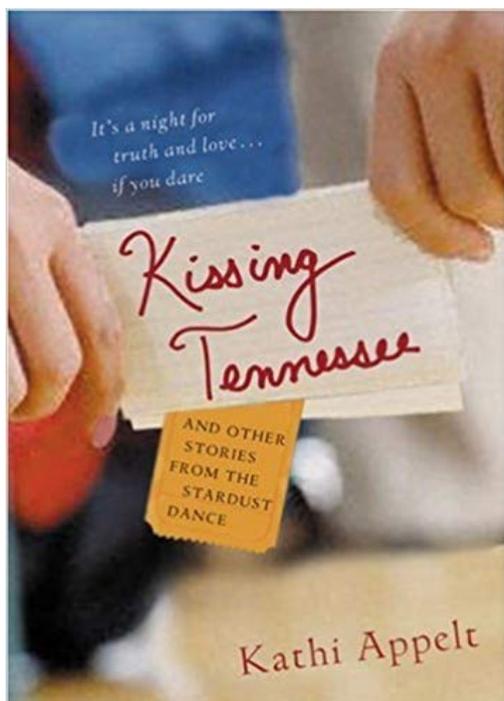


Kissing Tennessee: and Other Stories from the Stardust Dance *by* Kathi Appelt



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Author: Kathi Appelt

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Mason and Carrie Marie can't get up the courage to ask each other to dance. Russ's girlfriend has died, and now he's just trying to live without her. Peggy Lee has grown up with Tennessee--how can she ever think of him as more than a friend? In these moving tales and others, Kathi Appelt captures the sometimes amusing, sometimes touching missteps of some unforgettable students, who come together one last time for the most memorable night of their young lives.



Reviews of the **Kissing Tennessee: and Other Stories from the Stardust Dance** *by* Kathi Appelt

Hrguig

It's Friday May 31st. Between 8pm and 11pm the Dogwood Junior High cafeteria will be transformed with cardboard stars and sparkling moons hanging from wire, and the Rot Whilers belt out tunes for

the eighth graders. This is the Stardust Dance - a night when boys can be daring, one lucky girl will be crowned Stardust Queen and magic might just happen. . .

First published in 2000, 'Kissing Tennessee: and Other Stories from the Stardust Dance' is a collection of young adult short stories by Kathi Appelt.

Sometimes I judge a book by its cover and decide to read based purely on the pretty. Very occasionally am I persuaded to a book because of the title alone - but that's what happened with Appelt's short story collection. I just love, love, loved that whimsically intriguing title: 'Kissing Tennessee: and Other Stories from the Stardust Dance' - it's lush and lovely and gave me visions of soft blue lights, sweaty palms, best pinching shoes and hands-on-shoulders dancing, *sigh*. Sadly, I think I built the title up too much in my mind and came to this book with too high expectations because while it's by no means bad, 'Kissing Tennessee' didn't leave me with that butterflies-in-stomach, heart-in-mouth feeling I was desperately hoping for.

Some of the vignettes in Appelt's book really worked for me and I loved them. But the stories I liked best were actually the violent/sad ones . . . which just so happened to be the stories that had the strongest connection to the Stardust Dance theme, and were (in my opinion) the hardest-hitting and best written. Take, for instance, 'Just a Kiss, Annie P.' in which a boy laments the death of his childhood crush, whose memory comes back to haunt him while he's dancing with another girl. In 'The Right Word', Becca Scott sits in a toilet stall at Dogwood Junior High while the Stardust Dance carries on without her. As she starts crying and heaving, she reads a year's worth of graffiti scribbled on the bathroom walls, and through a few choice words starts piecing her story together - telling how her boyfriend led her away from the dance, and into the woods. . .

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Becca was there, in the dark woods. This very night. There, instead of at the Stardust Dance. She slipped out the bathroom window and let herself be led into the dark, dark woods, far away from the Dogwood Junior High cafeteria, with its dancers and drummer.

BONE OF TRUTH

- 'The Right Word'

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It's hard to read those two really quite hard-hitting and beautifully written stories, and then switch back to vignettes in which the high-achiever and the slacker desperately want to be each other's last dance.

Don't get me wrong; some of those more relaxed and sweet short stories were okay, and offered some nice moments you'd expect from an eighth grade dance;

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Flash! She opened her eyes just in time to see Sky Williams take their picture. And that's when the floating had started. The cafeteria floor just fell away beneath her feet. And even though Tennessee is holding her hand, she's still way up off the ground, like one of those helium balloons, floating up there with the clouds and the comets and the birds.

- `Kissing Tennessee'

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But then there were some short stories I felt were trying too hard for a flimsy connection to the Stardust Dance theme. Like `Rachel's Sister' a story about two girls abused by their bible-thumping father. I think Appelt could have made this story fit better into the school-dance theme, but instead most of the action in this short happened in the past and at the girl's home (as opposed to being about their dad, maybe, embarrassing them at the dance by dragging them home?).

I was impressed that Appelt covered a variety of teen topics and `issues' with these short stories, without ever making it feel like she was ticking boxes. For instance, the story `Starbears', about a young boy trying to grapple with his strong feelings for his best friend, was subtle and all the more powerful for being so understated;

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Then suddenly the message was clear, blazing in midair, like a comet.

- `Starbears'

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The whole book comes to about 115-pages, and I think I wanted a little bit more. I would have liked to spend time in more stories than others, or just had more stories altogether (for such a whimsical title, I do think a surrealist story would have been a nice one to add to the mix? Or even a ghost story - just something out of left-field). I wasn't blown away by this collection like I wanted to be, but I would recommend this to young readers because Appelt manages to cover some quite weighty topics in short, and bittersweet vignettes.

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Kathi Appelt has outdone herself. Long accomplished as a picture book writer (see her new *The Alley Cat's Meow*--absolutely wonderful!) she has now distinguished herself as a young adult author. This series of related stories captures the angst that junior high age teens grapple with. Appelt covers it all, from abusive parents to rape to homosexuality. And through it all, she maintains a light touch and lyrical way with words. This is delicious writing!!

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The Type A in me really enjoyed the short story format, with chapters subtly linked not only by setting (junior high dance), but also by expanding on characters who are mentioned only briefly in other stories. More than once, the narrative took a turn I was not expecting. The author was smart enough to anticipate what I thought was going to happen, and chose not to go with the obvious. I love when that happens! Readers mid-teen and older will relate to the kaleidoscope of personalities and school drama reflected in the various vignettes of the bittersweet transition into adulthood.

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Orevise

The first time I read this book, I was in Middle School. I loved it then and a couple of the stories just stuck with me through the years. I had forgotten the title of the book, but I could never forget a few

of the stories. Years later, while in University, I tried to find the book again, but I could not remember for the life of me what it was called. Finally, I found it by chance. I borrowed it from the library, and discovered that it was just as good the second time as it was the first time.

Kissing Tennessee is made up of a series of short stories surrounding the kids at the Stardust Dance in a middle school. The book starts with an invitation to attend the dance and then ends with a poem from the janitor as she cleans up the glitter from the dance. In between are stories that are both happy and sad. There are stories of death and rape and abuse as well as stories of first kisses and finding yourself. These are real issues that teenagers are faced with today.

The stories are so dynamic and so real that they stick with you days after you have finished reading it. It is a short book with only just over 100 pages. I recommend that if you have a library card and your library has this book, that you borrow it and read it. It shouldn't take more than two to three hours but it will stick with you in your hear for a long time.

Rating: 5/5

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Kissing Tennessee and Other Stories from the Stardust Dance by Kathi Appelt is a book of short stories about teens and some of the problems they face. These are some of the examples that the kids face in the eight stories. In Rachel's Sister, Mary Sarah struggles against memories of her and her sister escaping their abusive father. In Starbears Cub Tanner deals with his confusion about The Question, which is really many questions all rolled up into one. Why does he have such strong feelings for Trent Davis? In These Shoes, Tawny learns that you don't have to rich and have everything in the world to be happy. I gave this book four stars because these stories were fun to read and they made you think. Since the stories were so short, they made you wonder what would happen next if they kept going. I didn't want some of the stories to end. I think this is a good book for people who want to try reading a different style of writing. I really enjoyed this book and I think that all young readers should try it.

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