



The Stolen: Two Short Stories

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In "The Fields", Clarice is a governess on a small, remote backwater colony. Her previous misdemeanours in a nightmarishly controlling world have caught up to her, and she is taken in with other felons for re-education. Little does she know what this re-education will include...or its price.

In "WordThieves", Sarah White is trapped in a nightmarishly bureaucratic peacenik paradise on Io. Spending her days daydreaming about untranslatable words and craving candy, her world is mostly idyllic. Until, that is, she runs into an old familiar face, and breaks the fragile tension holding her life together.

What crimes are committed in the name of peace, control, and harmony? In a world where public violence is a distant memory and peer pressure is a mandated punishment, Clarice and Sarah are about to find out.

The Stolen: Two Short Stories Details

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From Reader Review The Stolen: Two Short Stories for online ebook

S.L. Wallace says

The Stolen: Two Short Stories (the Meaning Wars) consists of two short stories set worlds apart in the same far distant future. However, in both societies citizens are carefully watched, their lives strictly regulated. Though similar in nature to 1984 by George Orwell, Ms. Browne has crafted her own unique tale complete with those who rebel against Big Brother. I'm looking forward to reading more in The Meaning Wars series.

Kayla Stonor says

The Fields and The Word-Thieves slightly freaked me out. Both stories have an underlying theme of society/'employers' controlling their citizens/workers. A small warning: the author drops you into both worlds with little set up. No handholding. Nor are there a whole load of answers – makes you think.

The Fields is frightening, relatively short, and sometimes hard to understand. I just grasped the societal make up of privileged owners and their families versus their slaves. What came over loud and clear is how petty rules can assume the importance of real crimes, such as murder and rape. The real crime in The Fields is the supposed rehabilitation, a theme echoed in The Word Thieves.

In The Word-Thieves the POV is not always clear, but the story is clearly Sarah's. She edits literary works, removing anything distasteful that the Io's ruling body has decreed corrupting. Io is supposed to be a world of peace and harmony as preached by its 'guru bible'. Toby is an old friend. His arrival sufficiently disturbs Sarah's façade of coping for her to broadcast her true feelings, thus attracting unwanted attention.

What follows is a harrowing account of the rehabilitation that awaits those who challenge a state's utopian view. When a rebellious Sarah continues to scratch the surface she exposes the dark and violent hypocrisy supporting Io's preferred state of being, i.e. unthinking adherence to goodness. The real tragedy of this story is that the purity of the philosophy underlying Io's aspirational goal has been eradicated through its implementation by narrow-minded, self-righteous zealots. (I only glimpsed these zealots through their minion's actions, but I know they exist in the background. Probably reclining in some sun-soaked villa while exceeding the alcohol restrictions imposed for everyone else's own good.)

This is where this book earns its five stars from me. The Word-Thieves is scary because it explores societies that have lived, died, and flourish today. Such societies will no doubt continue to arise wherever there are people who think they know better than the common man. This book screams out why free speech, open justice, and a huge dose of common sense, are such precious commodities to be protected.

I encourage every jobsworth – with the guts to take a good, hard look at themselves – to read these two stories and then consider just how far they might be prepared to go. Everyone else read it and note why you need to keep these jobsworths in their place.

'In their place.' See, this is how it starts . . .

Titan says

Note: The author is a friend. No impact whatsoever on my opinion or review.

Wow. I hope no one draws the wrong conclusions about my saying this, but I'm afraid I must compare, in a manner of speaking, Michelle Browne's "The Stolen" to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Before you bark, hear me out: I mean only to point out that my personal opinion about each, at least writing-wise, is similar.

In my *Neuromancer* review, I mention how pretty much every sci-fi I'd ever read up until then suffered from straight-laced, unimaginative writing, but now *Neuromancer* gave me hope that the artful combination of imagination and science could catapult a novel into greatness.

Here, with "The Stolen," I'm afraid I must say the same. Michelle Browne's handle of the language, period point blank, kinda astounds me, most of the time. The way that she inserts in between instances of her science fiction does much the same. I appreciate it very much, and if I'd had more time, there'd be a long and loving list of quotes for me to end this review with. I will say that I have an arm I dedicate to wonderful phrases of the literary and musical mind to have tattooed, and I'm seriously considering one of them for candidacy. The space is limited, and tattoos, as we all know, are permanent, so that Michelle Browne wrote something which made me wanna get it done should scream buckets about how I feel about her talent.

As for the stories which her words tell--wow (another wow, yeah), huge undertakings of imagination and near-flawless execution. "The Fields" began this short story collection and quickly stole the show with its attention, but "Wordthieves" constituted over half the collection and without apology dunked me facefirst into the strangely cool, cruel world of Io. I have a gigantic soft spot for Io, but the civilization proliferating here makes me shudder with revulsion.

It's not often I walk away from a short story collection with a sense of having just completed a novel--and a really good one, at that--but with "The Stolen," I feel like I've merely peeked into two universes that have so much more to tell.

Michelle Willms says

The Stolen by Michelle Browne

The Stolen is made up of two novellas, "The Fields" and "The Word Thieves."

"The Fields" opens in a prison during the evening hours. The inmates have just arrived at their newest "home." The heroine, Clarice, is describing the accommodations, and lists her few possessions. She has managed to smuggle in a few necessary items.

After arising the next morning, the inmates are separated according to sex, as they prepare for breakfast. Many collapse from apparent or alleged stress, but the guards force them to their feet and make them continue onward.

They eat, and wear braces for forced good posture, attend etiquette classes, and work the fields. Contraband is confiscated and those holding such objects are harshly punished. Friendships are rare. Clarice has only one. The slaves begin to disappear one by one. Many inmates break down emotionally and simply disappear.

"The Stolen" cuts to the heart of many of society's foolish rules. Browne speaks with a clarity that few of

today's authors can access.

“The Word Thieves”

Imagine a world where government employment consists of “un-writing” the greatest works of all time. People are employed to rewrite the works of literature and remove all references to anything that might be construed as passionate, or offensive or otherwise against the ToYoBiKo, the planet's equivalent of the Good Book. Negative emotions are strongly discouraged. Strong emotions of any kind, for that matter, are not a good idea.

“The Word Thieves” is a work of pure genius, but is simultaneously a book of pure horror. Michelle Browne's mind works in frightening ways, bringing forth ideas so realistic, so horrific that the reader knows, deep down, that someone, somewhere wishes that this nightmare world existed in reality.

This novel was provided by the author in exchange for an honest review.

Angela Mortimer says

Beautifully Scribed vision of a possible future

Very well written. Dark, terrifying, keening, dreadful. Everything hateful about that part of the human race. The word SLAVE - everyone should remember what it really means, it's used banally way too much nowadays.

The Word Thieves -Again beautifully written prose, perfect pace, perfect pitch, perfect. I do so agree with the authors dreadful vision and so wish I didn't. Let's edit everything or perhaps best not....brilliant. True Horror. I cried

Christopher Shields says

The book consists of two short stories; I enjoyed the first, but it left me wanting for more and for that reason, I give it a 4 star rating. The second story, however, a powerful dystopian jaunt on censorship, was excellent and by far my favorite of the two. I give it 5 stars. Without spoiling the story for others, I'll just say the characters were fully fleshed and I felt their pain through Browne's excellent story telling and powerful writing style. It's tight and cohesive--a remarkable feat given the length. This author has talent and I will certainly be looking for her future work. If you're looking for an excellent read to fill an afternoon, do not hesitate to grab a copy. I highly recommend.

Corinne says

This book contains two short stories. They were both well-written and center around the themes of having our freedom to view the world around us how we want to view it, stolen. I do think that the second story, Word Thieves, could stand on its own, and I actually would have preferred for that story to be presented first, as the main story. It was a little jarring going from the first story, The Fields, to the second story as my brain tried to connect the two beyond theme.

There were a few places in which the prose was a bit drawn out, or lost, as it became unclear who was speaking or thinking, but these points were few and didn't take away from the overall enjoyment of the story, or its message. Both stories deal with repression and mental reeducation. The Fields focuses mainly on sexual repression, while Word Thieves focuses on the repression of thought on a broader scale through the subversive removal of certain themes in language and literature.

"Destroying worlds by destroying words."

You can tell the author is well-read and versed in literature. I did struggle a bit with the overall scope of what was taking place on Io, and what the leaders were attempting to achieve. In a future where books are all digital, how could they possibly hope to police every digital copy ever created or saved? That little brain-tickle aside, the story is excellent, beautifully written and recommended.

Sharon Stevenson says

'The Stolen' contains 2 short sci-fi stories starring feisty females on dystopian worlds.

'The Fields' is the story of Clarice, a rule breaker sent to a sort of prison for governesses who misbehave. I found Clarice almost instantly likeable and I really sympathised with her. The repression she fights against is extreme - sexually suggestive items, such as stockings, are illegal yet she smuggles them in to the Reformatory with her. This is the shorter of the two stories and it's a great introduction to Browne's writing style.

'Word Thieves' is the story of Sarah, a disillusioned young woman working on a foreign planet where censorship is a way of life. Sarah has a great love of language so her anger over rewrites of the likes of Shakespeare is understandable and makes for some fantastically witty dialogue. I found this the more entertaining of the two, as there is quite a bit of dark humour drawn out of the repressive situations.

Both of these stories were real page-turners and my only complaint was that there wasn't more as I really would have liked to keep reading! Browne has created fascinating fully formed worlds with interesting characters I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know.

I realised while reading this book that the vast majority of sci-fi books I've read have had male narrators, so Browne's strong female characters made a very refreshing change. For me this was something totally different & I loved every minute of it. Highly recommended!

Kirstin Pulioff says

Wow! Both of these stories are masterfully crafted. The subtle details, the realism of character, and the thought provoking nature of the underlying message made for a wonderful book.

Both stories focus on the liberties of a person, and what happens when these freedoms are forcibly controlled and restricted. Painful abuse, mental fragility, and questions about the future are only the beginning.

Michelle creates wonderfully deep characters, perhaps a bit crude, but believable under the disenchantment of life and harsh realities life has imposed.

The voice of the story is highly reminiscent of A Brave New World. I highly recommend these stories. Two wonderfully crafted stories about life's stolen potential, by a writing genius!

Martha Emms says

I'm new to reading Dystopian, so maybe I am not the best person to give a review but here goes. Let me start with the best first. "The Word-Thieves" captured my interest right away. So much of what is happening in this story we may be on the very brink of today. In a day, when people seem easily threatened by words, many must pussy foot around what words to use for fear of hurting someones feelings. It makes the reader, wonder where will this restraint of our free speech end, especially as you read this story. Cleaning, and sanitizing literature, stripping away what is assumed as not nice. Editing the best works, such as Hamlet and Dickens to cleanse the world of sarcasm, violence, and sex. The author is creative with a story that is not only clever but thought provoking. On a planet full of censorship, where only good is allowed it is ironic who or what defines is good on this planet. One wonders if happiness can come from only being nice and good, having no jealousy, passion, drive, or anger, erasing the past, destroying text from the great works of all our authors. Mostly, you the reader, are taken to a place where you see if one can be happy when all those rights are stripped away from you. The only thing I found wrong with this story, is I believe it should be a full novel and not a short. I wanted more and the author has the talent, smarts, and imagination to provide it. In "The Fields," it was a different story for me. In some parts I found it difficult to understand, what and why things where happening, but as I said previously I am new to reading this genre. On the whole I give the author a four star rating because, "The Word-Thieves," is that good. I would definitely read more of her stories.

Nicolas Wilson says

This is Nic's wife writing the review.

Michelle Browne is an engaging writer- I've read some of her other stuff, too. She does pick fun concepts, and has unique twists to add to the dystopian formula. I don't think these stories are some of her stronger work, since although the characters are well written, they aren't quite able to build a society around the dystopian elements.

In the first one, especially, the information on the evolution of the thought-police type state is pretty vague. At any rate, I had a hard time looking to see what the "profit" would be in maintaining the kinds of violent dystopias displayed here.

The characters are well written, and the cuss-word idiosyncrasies in Word Thieves (the second story) are hilarious. Browne is a competent storyteller, and creates some unique visuals, and some very visceral worlds. I just wish these felt like they had something to really vocalize about the societal trends leading to the formation of the dystopic systems, or the system's financial or cultural interest in maintaining itself. They were fun, but the lack of the sociological worldbuilding meant that they didn't stick with me as much as some of her other work has.

They're still well worth a read, though, and I hope you go on to read The Loved, The Lost, The Dreaming next, since those stories show the true range of Browne's literary skills.

Yelle Hughes says

The Stolen consisted of two short stories in the dystopia era. The first; The Fields tells of a governess who misbehaved (or so they say) and is sent to a reformatory with others like her. Each incarcerated for minor and I mean minor, infractions.

Michelle describes a world where nothing seems to be pleasant but the main character, Clarice and her sidekick Margo make the best of the situation, sheer drudgery, lack of freedom, repression...unable enjoy pleasure, it was pure hell. But Clarice endured, 'till she lost Margo. Michelle's description of her sorrow and her loss of spirit was heart wrenching.

As written, "she broke" was the turn of Clarice's survival mojo. The last two pages of The Fields brought everything to light, not only did Clarice survive but she got her friend Margo back and others who would form a coalition to live their lives without repression.

In The Word-Thieves, you have a totally different setting. In outer space, where you have Sarah, who works on one planet and Crystal, who works on another, the two can only communicate through letters. Michelle conveys Sarah's frustration with being isolated and the only thing to entertain her, are Crystals accounts of what's going on in her side of the universe.

Michelle's description of Io was perfect. I could see the tubal shaped city with its glassy corridors. Sarah apparently took a job that she absolutely hated, but because she needed money, needed to be able to use her degree, wanted a new life that didn't suck. But is what she got in return, worth it? She lamented over the fact there were certain activities and freedoms that were not allowed. One thing that made her tolerate this world was reuniting with an old friend from another planet.

Michelle's humor throughout was refreshing, "Soy Chicken Blandwich" was hilarious. Michelle has opened up an entire new world, and in its dystopia manner, it gives the downsides of man's decisions.

All in all, I appreciate the author opening my eyes to this new world and to appreciate the things and freedom I do have. I am giving this five stars because the writing was sharp, the surroundings and landscape were described perfectly. The girls' story kept me riveted, not because it was a happy-go-lucky story but of two women in different situations...coping and surviving.

Teresa Garcia says

I did not want to put this down, and was chafing so much when my son was using my Nook Color that I finally had to fix my Nook for PC just so I could finish this book. It's right up there with Ray Bradbury and Orson Scott Card.

Both of these stories dealt with themes of maintaining one's independence at all costs. I really liked the first story, but my favorite between them was the second. I laughed audibly with glee when Sarah found the secret in the slightly thicker pages. I was wishing I could have seen this TorYoBiKo myself. When her cousin told her he was leaving Io after she tried to pass the message on to him, my stomach promptly knotted up.

Rape did get implied, but it was handled very tactfully, and it made me hate the guards even more. It was handled so well that I would not have any problems with my pre-teen reading this, and it will probably get read to the family when I reinstate family reading. The story ended at a good point too. Things were well wrapped up, but left with an implication that Sarah was going to work hard to spread the message of the original tome.

I was particularly gratified in the comparisons that can be made with how the spiritual movement's sacred book in this fiction can be compared with the sacred books of our own religious and spiritual movements. Things get edited out, and chunks are missing that never quite get smoothed over. I think this is a good reminder in how important it is to do as the Buddha advises...and inquire for yourself.

Calamus says

Brown's two stories, "The Fields" and "The Word Thieves" are both tales of censorship and repression in each female lead's separate dystopian world. "The Fields" is an account of Clarice's stay in a moral reform prison. Clarice is a fighter, and she keeps her spirit from breaking by continuing to enjoy brief conversations with other prisoners and her own sexuality, despite the fact that it could get her killed, or worse. This story was very short in length, but packed a punch through the narrator's vivid description of her longings, her enslavement, and her eventual escape. "The Word Thieves" was more a novella in form, and was a beautifully written account of the rebellious young Sarah. Sarah lives in a pristine, futuristic world where all of her most important rights are controlled: her rights to read, write, and speak freely. Her fight against this oppression focuses primarily on her feelings and decisions, which much like Clarice, get her in frightening trouble.

I really enjoyed Browne's writing and characterization. The main ladies and their desire to learn, grow, and seek pleasure is the focus of each story. Contrasting from typical Science Fiction, Browne spares the intricate details of the surrounding worlds and the powers that be. She did not try to squeeze too much into a small space, and I found it refreshing.

Though I won't be recommending this read to the 9th graders I teach (mostly because of Browne's open love of masturbation and the "F" word), I would spend another afternoon reading her work. She has authored three other Science Fiction pieces (And the Stars Will Sing, The Underlighters, and The Loved, The Lost, The Dreaming). All are available on Amazon.

Reviewed by Joan
www.calamusworks.com

John Dolan says

I recently reviewed Ms Browne's novella 'And the Stars Will Sing' on my Galericulate blog and was suitably impressed.

These dystopian short stories move her up another gear.

'Word Thieves', which owes something of its genesis to George Orwell's '1984' (and indeed there is a character in it named Julia) is a tightly-constructed piece where she moves her characters towards hubris

with a claustrophobic intensity. As with her earlier work, Ms Browne's vision of the future is not one comprised solely of shiny technology, but serves rather as an appropriate backdrop for a nightmare vision of totalitarianism. I note that her latest work – 'The Loved, The Lost, The Dreaming' – is in the horror genre, which in some ways is a logical extension of what she started here ...

'The Fields' is a much shorter and therefore less substantial piece, but the snarky heroine keeps you engaged, and Ms Browne has a surprise or two up her sleeve.

Five stars and no arguments!
