

# Book festival Northern Arizona

## ***Red Ant House*, by Ann Cummins Review by Alexis McMillan**

I came to this collection backwards. My first introduction was to the last story, “Billy By the Bay,” which I saw performed by the author, along with blues piano player Steve Willis. More than a simple reading, Cummins crooned her words into a microphone against a strolling background of tinkly piano notes. Willis’s composition underscored the quick action and complex emotion of Billy, a simple guy who loses his job and the chance of having a girl on the night of his birthday. So when I sat down with the printed collection of short stories more than a year later, it was impossible to ignore the musicality of Cummins’s prose, even in the printed form.

I came to this collection sideways. I’ve lived just outside of the Navajo reservation for a while now, and I thought it was a place that I was at least beginning to understand. So I was pleased when the stories of *Red Ant House* centered around places like Shiprock and Farmington, when the dry dusty heat of the earth became a living presence in the text. But the world Cummins describes is a place I’ve never been, and likely will never be: Indian trading posts run by Mormons, uranium mining communities, a Knights of Columbus tent at the Shiprock Fair. Emotion is muted in these stories to the extent that the landscape behind them tells all that needs to be said. I was shocked to look back at the contents page and realize that only six of twelve selections were actually set on the Reservation. But even when the content strays from that particular landscape, the mood never does.



I came to this collection upside down. I had expectations of what a short story does, what its goals and conflicts could be. *Red Ant House* broke all these rules and more, and did it so effectively that I didn’t even hear my anticipations shattering. Prose spins here, lulls you into thinking that you’ve discovered the central plot (ah! Karen’s realizing the false art of a hypnotist’s middle school performance in “Trapeze”!), distracts you with new characters and unrelated complications (the bully Purple, and her effort to keep Karen from the parallel bars in gymnastics), throws in odd details (a stolen ring, a giant purple sweater that earns the bully her nickname), and somehow steams it all together so that it seems the only natural way to tell the story. Finding a conclusion takes work, but it’s rewarding work. “Hypnotism is simply willful delusion,” Karen learns from the hypnotist early on, but the reader sees this actualized twenty pages later, when Purple reveals her own mastery of the craft.

It doesn’t really matter what direction you approach this collection from, so long as you approach it. It will surprise you no matter what you expect, and the surprise will be a luscious one.

## **Northern Arizona Book Festival**

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