



## Your Smallest Bones: Stories

*Sean Taylor*

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Your Smallest Bones is a collection of short fiction built on the sounds we make when we run out of sounds. Can you hear them yet? All you have to do is help an ex-lover push a grand piano out onto a frozen lake. You have to break both of your thumbs in perfect symmetry to grow up. You have to bind mattresses like books, with all the classics penned to them, just to get some sleep. You heard them with the smallest bones, inside your inner ear. Somedays, there is perfection in the quiet of your hands pressing play on the braille love letters of a blind man. Somedays, life sounds like an earthquake detector while you're in the shower. Then you hear your neighbors sounds. On the day of her husbands funeral, a woman recreates a stick-up from her favorite western. The sound of an eccentric marriage nearly lost to the mislabeling of coconut juice. Or in a tea garden after a conversation with a child, a man finds heaven as he timidly describes hell. Can you hear it now? Across town when a pianist loses his hearing, he paints the color spectrum along his piano keys to regain his favorite lost notes. Meanwhile, a girl next door carries a prayer, from the lions she feeds, into a song, for a parrot she adopts. These stories play the out-stretched gasp, they play the shiver, the hope whisper, and the buckling fear.

## Your Smallest Bones: Stories Details

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## From Reader Review Your Smallest Bones: Stories for online ebook

### Sean Taylor says

"Your Smallest Bones, by Sean Taylor

Feb. 1, Seven7h Tangent

Peculiar little things, like wanting to know how many teeth are in your zipper when you're a 9-year-old too afraid to jump, and surreal, impossible things, like pushing a grand piano into the center of a frozen lake, anchor the watching and waiting and wondering of introverts who often mistake random chance for omens as they reach out to touch the world to see if it is real."-SF Weekly Winter Arts 2015

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### Shane says

Thanks again to Goodreads for an opportunity to read a book that would likely have passed by my notice without the giveaways here.

Sean Taylor has crafted something truly magical with this tiny little collection of stories. Vignettes narrated by voices that are gentle, wise and poetic. Sean writes from the viewpoint of a curious child as easily as he writes from the perspective of a confused elderly person mourning the loss of a loved one in all of it's jagged pain. What lies between the covers of this small, brilliant collection is truly poignant in it's vision of humans and our lives. Childhood broken bones, found braille letters from a love from the worlds past, the changes we endure in our love, growth, relationships as well as the stewardship of our own destinies...the author confronts and creates these slices of life with a reverence and respect for humanity that feels like poetry.

The simplest of truths are so often the most moving and profound. As an author, Sean Taylor reminds us of this, word after carefully chosen word. Sean Taylor is an artist and Your Smallest Bones is undoubtedly art. Masterful art that strips us all of everything that masks the truth that we are indeed small frail humans on a quite often sad and yet beautiful journey through life. I was not entertained as much as validated in my human experience as I read this. If only we could all see the lives that surround us in the way that Sean Taylor has in "Your Smallest Bones".

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### Bryan D. says

50 of 75 in 2015. I found this collection of short stories both lyrical and disturbing. Written in a cross between blank verse and stream of consciousness, the stories treat such subjects as homelessness, assisted suicide, breaking up. Often bleak in outlook, the stories remain fascinating, due largely to the author's gift with words. I recommend the collection with this caveat--I did not find the stories uplifting, rather

depressing, but well written.

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### **Josh says**

I received this as an ARC via Goodreads and the Author.

‘Your Smallest Bones’ is a short-story collection from American writer Sean Taylor. As I started to read the first story ‘Flight and Weightless’, I started to gauge what type of writer Sean seemed to be; one with an effortless flow of prose, gently put on paper seamlessly. It is a story of life and death and what it means to see a loved one die in their own way; with dignity as they slowly perish or slip away by the fingertips which bind you completely: cancerous rage subsided, ready for pain to cease.

As I read on through the others, I can honestly say I was less impressed, but as a whole, not an overall mess. If you must, read it for the story above. It’s as good as one you’ll find in today’s short-story pool of talent.

Rated a 2 here, but would give it a 2.5 if possible.

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### **Lynn Arbor says**

Taylor's playfulness with our language is a treat. I got a freebie version through BookBub, and I then I bought this book. I wanted one that I could hold in my hand and reread passages. I want to underline sentences.

Some reviewer complained about formatting. Formatting can be fixed. Copy editing would be helpful. BUT formatting and editing have nothing to do with real talent. When I finished the first story, i paced around the house with the hairs on my arms standing up, tingling! I've never had that kind of reaction to a book before (and it wasn't the flu). I'm very impressed.

I hope the author will write many more books. And I hope lots of readers find him.

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### **Aaron Mcquiston says**

I have read two short stories collections this week. The first was "Black Dahlia & White Rose" by Joyce Carol Oates, and the second was this collection by Sean Taylor. The contrast between these two collections could not be more staggering. Oates's collection is filled with stories she might have written in an afternoon, did not proofread, and basically said, "Screw it. Good enough." Taylor's collection is the complete opposite. His stories are smartly constructed, his plots are strong and his characters are well developed. His stories are heartbreakingly gut-wrenching as if some of these stories, some of the small details, are not things that he made up, but things that he is using as little hints to lovers he has lost. Like every collection, there are some stories that are better than others, but as whole, this is a solid, lyrical, wonderful short story collection. And much much better than anything Joyce Carol Oates is producing.

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### **Susan says**

A GOOD COLLECTION OF SHORT STORY THAT READ MORE AS A POEM THAN A STORY I LOVED FLIGHT AND WEIGHTLESS PLAYING A PIANO ON A FROZEN LAKE AND HANDS PRESSING PLAY THE LOVE LETTER IN BRAILLE THANKS TO GOODREADS FIRSTREADS FOR THE FREE BOOK

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### **Brian says**

Sean Taylor has created a pocket for readers to store their most delicate thoughts, their most impossible hopes, and their most intricate memories. This pocket is not unlike the one found in jeans, the smallest one that rests just below where the right hip bone juts from the belt line, the one most often empty, where musicians keep guitar picks and married men hide their wedding rings when their wives are out of town.

The stories in this collection are windows into humanity. They accomplish what any great piece of writing should always strive to do—illuminate something about the human condition. The stories center largely around residents of San Francisco; starving for love and validation in a mish-mashed city of hodgepodge all stacked on top of one another sharing the air to breathe. Much in the way Jhumpa Lahiri speaks to readers of any cultural background through stories of Indian-Americans, or how John Cheever's work is applicable to people of any social class despite its focus on wealthy New Yorkers, Sean Taylor has created stories which subtly ask a reader, of any cultural or socioeconomic background, to look inside themselves, and into their own culture, and wonder what it means to be part of a conglomerate, as well as singularly, within one's self.

Sean Taylor does this through a focus, manifesting often as a meditation, on the smallest parts of an individual, like the vertebra in our backs, or distance between hairs on our heads, or the gaps between our toes. These things we often overlook, ignoring them in hopes of flushed cheeks and a pounding heart, the perfect reflection of lamplight from someone's eyes. But life doesn't always give signals so obviously. Sometimes it does so through the small things, the smallest bones.

Since reading this collection I find myself wondering about people I pass on the sidewalk, sit next to on the train, or even glimpse for a moment through a window, wondering about how their hair looks in the morning, how they push back their cuticles, or if they do. Because this is the pocket, the one most often empty, that Sean Taylor has created. The woman selling cigarettes and cough medicine at the drug store, what she has in her tiny pocket, the one just below her right hip bone, could be what is most important to you, and you didn't even know it.

The next time you see a man in the rain without an umbrella, don't wonder where he is walking to with such conviction, wonder what is in his tiny pocket. It could be a guitar pick, or a wedding ring, or it could be a whole lot more.

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### **Brenda says**

I stopped about a third of the way through. The stories I read didn't seem to resolve anything, they just

kind of ended. Not my style. I didn't really understand the stories I read.

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### **Anne says**

I read this concurrently with Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, a novel I gave five stars, so I can say with some authority that I enjoy stories about isolated eccentric people with quirky speech patterns. The difference is that Fowler manages to be earnest without always being deadly serious. Taylor's characters, on the other hand, always seem to be in the midst of a crisis, and so determined to wring every drop of meaning they can from the situation that there's no room for humor or irony. I won't say that it's bad, just that I disliked it, which is what a single star means.

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### **Jamie Lundy says**

Your Smallest Bones reveals to us the beauty of the, at first glance, insignificant. The stories are a collection of snapshots: an ending relationship, a chance conversation in a tea garden, a child's adventure, a fall, an escape of the self from the self. The pulse of the character is discovered and revealed through these simple and quiet moments. Each story presents a study of humanity, and in the intimacy of reading braille love letters by feeling the gentle curve and dent of the content ("Hands Pressing Play"), the stories present to us the unique intimacy of spying on ourselves at our most vulnerable. The exposure elevates us; Sean trains our eye to note and marvel at the unnoted perfection of a coffee stir, or a child's weighted question, or the press of the fingertip against a window ("She plays (blow) press the steam to the window, and with this discovery heat she replaces the misplaced fingertips that other people from previous house parties came to leave") (109). Reminiscent of James Joyce's Dubliners and writers like John Cheever, Sean's prose gracefully and tenderly absorbs the reader in a "small" moment and that provides the opportunity to discuss something profound about the human condition.

Sean captures the world in his writing. Each story possesses a fierce fire in its core while focusing on and revealing the moments, the winks, the breaths, and the sheen of each second. He writes both the cell and the entire forest. Marianne Moore suggests that writing should place readers in imaginary gardens with real toads in them- and these stories do that. "Together Selfishly," for example, is a story that tells two characters and a one-night-stand through the slow second tick of the morning which they wake and leave one another. We learn them through their subtlest movements, their smallest decisions, their hesitations, the angles with which they lean toward and away from one another. The writing is sensuous and simple, lyrical and urgent, acute and vivid... It is writing that searches, that compels, that illuminates. Hemingway writes, "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." Lines like "so you play castanets with your frozen fingers that sound as beautiful as breaking glass," "If only a piece of chalk graced the tip of my cane, the world of this city would know you," "It was freezing outside and she was backless in Alaska," "Were there wind chimes in hurricanes?" "I knew in my short life that this was as close as I would come to being dressed as an astronaut. I remember pulling my hood over just before she leaned in to kiss my forehead. The drawstrings in both of my hands, pretending they were the cords pulled on the parachute, leaving me leaving her," arrest the mind and slow the pace of our rabid and casual consumption of character (11, 45, 52, 93, 98). The language is syntactically engaging, woven of fresh metaphors, and full of truth.

The writing itself is best described as minimalist: efficient, precise, and honest. Each story contains the careful masterpiece of a poem with the specificity, intention, and impact of the word choice. Sean assumes

intelligence of the reader, and his minimalist writing recalls the realism, intensity, and brevity of Raymond Carver, the linguistic economy of Amy Hempel, the perception of Ernest Hemingway, and the subtlety of the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez (“What You’re Waiting For”). Sean masters the ability to compress the character into a movement, the life-span of a relationship into a single question, the complexity and dynamism of the world into a single story. The stories present no resolution, require no front-loading, and provide no answers.

Perhaps, the lack of answers is the true value of the stories. Sean invites our awareness of the questions that trouble our existence, and rather than condescending to us by providing explanations and meaning, his stories inspire self and other exploration, dialogue, reflection, and wonder. Sean takes the individual consciousness and the isolated experience and places it in conversation with other, similar experiences. When read as a whole, each story is separate and contained, but together, the stories build towards a cohesive vision of the complexity of the individual as a member of a community of individuals. Thus, the collection is both a study of what it means to be a human, necessarily limited in connection to others by the restraints of the life of one’s internal reality, and what it means to be a member of a community of individuals so limited.

There are some common concerns that arise in the writing. As mentioned, the stories probe the difference between the character alone and the character in relationship with others, and the impediments that arise that restrict authentic connection and intimacy. There is the sentiency of young, fragile, delicate girls that ask arresting and meaning-heavy questions, and the sagaciousness of children. There is a questioning of the worth of the influence of our literary canon, and at different times, the stories either esteem and build from the work of celebrated writers or seem exhausted by them. The most experimental story, “The Burden of Legitimacy,” recalls Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*. In this story, Sean both pioneers a new style of story-telling and reinterprets the tradition of his characters while engaging us in conversation about the anxiety authors feel when considering the weight of the canon upon their work. The story recalls concerns about literary space and the authenticity of creation in a meta-dialogue about writing alongside the immortal works of writers-past. At other times, too, Sean has characters toss down dictionaries and *The Collected Works of Shakespeare*, as if self-consciously capturing his interest in the reinvention of language and the desire for space within the literary canon. Meta-thematically, Sara in “Hands Pressing Play” learns braille in order to read the unseen poetry of old love letters hidden within *The Collected Works of Shakespeare*. Indeed, Sean similarly refreshes our surface level understanding of language by reworking it and reteaching our eye to read the world in the word.

The stories also are preoccupied awareness of and concerns about our mortality. In one of the most delicate and gentle stories, “Flight and Weightless,” a young man helps his ex-girlfriend escape the encroaching death of terminal cancer by helping her push a piano onto the thin ice of a frozen lake. The focus on character and relationship focused the story on the preciousness of the individuals while de-emphasizing the predominant plot-concern: the approach and seeming necessity of Maria’s assisted suicide. Sean’s focus for the story troubles our relationship to unjust death and the hows of approaching the reality of one’s own mortality. Narrated through the perspective of the young man, the story contrasts his quiet, internal concerns with death with the jarring difference of Maria’s actions which capture her haphazard and clumsy approach to death: she is always vibrant and animated, she is disinterested in discussion (“I roll over and scratch your back asking if you’ve given god any thought... “No, why would I?” “It’s Sunday...” “There was a one-in-seven chance. When do you fly back?””), she is wrapping toiletries in chocolate wrappers like body bags, she is counting seconds while kissing on train-tracks (“If you loved me like a French film we would both be dead”) (20, 16). We wonder at Maria, “so beautifully thumbs-up though the frost bitten window,” the strangeness of her external health and the malignancy of the cancer devouring her inside, and the rightness of the simple relationship that allows her escape (22). There are no answers, and yet the story lingers, the characters fill our heart with the untold rest of their stories. Where Sean diverges from authors who have

tackled this theme before is Sean's stories focus on the beauty of life, rather than sinking the character under the weight of the world.

Thus, although Sean's writing contains many elements of minimalism, it is best described as a kind of "post-minimalism" or "romantic minimalism" or, perhaps most accurately, an "enriched minimalism." Carver, Hemingway, and Cheever's stark story-telling presents a very jarring realism at times; whereas Sean's minimalism remains buoyed by a commitment to the magic and beauty of humanity. In an age so characterized by disenchantment, these stories re-enchant our eyes. The true beauty of the stories in this collection is that they remind us of our beauty, our resiliency, our dignity. We love the characters because of the strength of the self that pushes through the superficially mundane, the common, the unoriginal of the world. In a world that threatens overlook and anomie, Sean's stories reveal how absolutely special and precious the insignificants are, down to their "smallest bones." When finishing the collection, one experiences a renewal of the soul and an appreciation of the other... one wonders about one's neighbors, the magic dream-scape of a child, the unsaid and the whisperings of sheets in a one-night-stand. The stories makes us interested in seeking our own stories and listening, really listening, to the stories of others. Savor these stories, surrender yourself to them, and let them haunt you.

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### **Isaac says**

I came across this book by the good graces of the author and Goodreads. This is the first time I've come across the young, Pushcart Prize nominated Taylor's work and I'm grateful. these 12, sometimes minimalist tales are the are some of the finest short stories I've read in some time. From the first story, "Flight and Weightless," a story of a young, recently separated couple who, by circumstances I won't reveal here, push a grand piano onto a frozen lake. The dialogue between the two echos the work of Raymond Carver or even Rick Bass but ultimately gives the reader a good idea of the unique voice behind these stories.

There's a touch of surrealism in the narration of these tales. In "Hands Pressing Play" a deaf musician paints the keys of his upright piano's keys in the colors of the light spectrum while a woman records the audio of her and her younger lovers for a ominous project in "Together Selfishly". A playful language and stories stripped of superfluous, flowery wordplay make this small collection stand out and offers me hope that a novel or another short story collection from Taylor is around the bend. I'll be anxious to read more but in the meantime I'll certainly be revisiting these stories and recommending them to others.

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### **Sam Slaughter says**

While some of the stories show promise, overall this collection just does not do it for me. More often than not the prose varies in voice and consistency and what could be considered poetic language looks more like drunken ramblings. The good stories--about a third of the book--don't take 'it' to the level they could and I was left disappointed. As a small sidenote: even though this was an ARC there was an overwhelming number of typos, etc in addition to the fact that the acknowledgements page mentions a Pushcart-nominated story that is not in the collection (or if it is the title was changed and this was not recorded)

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## **Stacey V says**

Beautiful anthology of short stories with fluid, lyrical writing styles. I enjoyed trying to uncover the link to "bones" in each story, as suggested by the title. It's there--sometimes more subtle than you might anticipate! A great read.

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## **Anita Lock says**

Your Smallest Bones is a compilation of twelve short stories about life and the incredibly small aspects – small bones, that are reminders of our human frailty. Primarily set in San Francisco, seven of the stories from this unique collection have appeared in various literary journals and two nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Rising author Sean Taylor knows how to “tailor” (no pun intended) a concept into story format. Quite a wordsmith, Taylor utilizes a wide variety of descriptive literary devices to breath life into his first and third person narratives. Taylor includes a blend of hyperboles and mixed metaphors that not only add both seriousness and comedy to his storytelling, but also give readers a moment to contemplate on his verbal presentation, and in that process hopefully grasp each story’s nuances. Lines such as “It was freezing outside, and she was backless in Alaska” and “We played amnesia for the security cameras” capture just a glimpse of what is in store for readers.

Taylor presents a slew characters – from young to old – amid an assortment of situations that is tightly coupled with Taylor’s colorful writing style. Some characters are purely nameless, as in the case of the apartment tenants that lace the vignettes in Weak Nights, the couple in This Is Too Much, and the narrator in What You’re Waiting For. Some stories have a combination of both, such as the nameless young man and his ex-girlfriend Maria in Flight and Weightlessness, the nine-year-old boy amid his named siblings in Ten Fingers Ten Toes, and the homeless man and his itinerant buddies, Jay and Bryce, in The Burden of Legitimacy. Full-bodied characters are found in stories, such as How Josh Met Emily, Hands Pressing Play, The Cherry in Spite of You, Depluralize the Pair, Where Pickled Jalapenos Grow, and Together Selfishly.

Regardless of the casting combo, Taylor easily draws readers into many familiar common-life scenarios that zero in minute facets – many times themes – of life that shine a light on human weakness. Scenarios are set in homes, hotels, nursing homes, and even among mattresses. Themes range from childhood mishaps and viewpoints on Heaven and Hell, death and dying, separation, growing old, and love jaunts. Speaking of love jaunts, Together Selfishly is one of those stories that will catch readers off guard. Seriously! And a quick word about reading the vignettes in Weak Nights: readers who are familiar with Hitchcock’s Rear Window may think back to L.B. Jefferies (aka Jeff), the wheel chair-bound professional photographer who gives a running commentary on his various tenants as he views them through his binoculars.

For readers who are looking for a book filled with great, thought-provoking human interest stories, Your Smallest Bones is unquestionably your next best read.

Originally posted on San Francisco Book Review.

Reviewed by Anita Lock

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