



PROJECT MUSE®

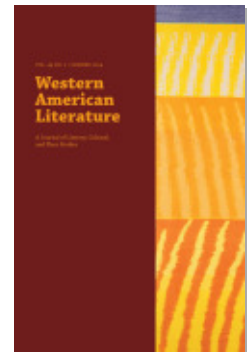
100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do: How My Brother Disappeared by
Kim Stafford (review)

Jenny Emery Davidson

Western American Literature, Volume 49, Number 2, Summer 2014, pp.
234-235 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2014.0055>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/549222>

farms, Short focuses on what she calls farmgiving, a concept that links land stewardship with a sense of reciprocity within community. In other words, farming has a cultural function, something she points to when she writes, “the biggest crop we grow at Stonebridge is community” (14).

If I have any quibble with the book, it is that Short gives insufficient attention to her coined term *ecobiography*, which she uses as her subtitle and to describe the writing workshops she offers at Stonebridge Farm. While she does discuss how the term is different from nature writing on the farm’s web site, she lets the subtitle stand without full explanation. As a scholar I think a term like *ecobiography* bears discussion. But that is a small issue with an otherwise satisfying read.

Evelyn Funda
Utah State University

Kim Stafford, *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do: How My Brother Disappeared*. San Antonio: Trinity UP, 2012. 202 pp. \$16.95.

The title *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do* brings to mind a Boy Scout manual, with its tricks for tying knots and starting fires, and Kim Stafford’s book, indeed, includes some scouting adventures and wilderness skills. This memoir, however, is an instruction manual on the most primitive arts of all: loving and losing.

The subtitle of Stafford’s poignant memoir is *How My Brother Disappeared*, evoking his relationship with his older brother, Bret, and Bret’s suicide at the age of forty. The narrative is a collection of vivid childhood memories that conjure a powerful brotherly bond. Stafford recalls the “bridge game” he and his brother enacted before sleep as little boys, stretching their bodies across the space between their two beds and crawling across each other’s backs before reciting a good night blessing. Together they seemed to exist at a precious angle of repose. “When it was just my brother and me,” Stafford writes, “we were like two pillars forming a tent of knowing, and we relied on each other” (44).

What happens, then, when one pillar disappears, and the “tent of knowing” collapses? Bret’s suicide calls into question the future,

as Kim Stafford struggles to go forward in his own story without his brother; and it casts doubt on the past, as the author struggles to interpret his brother's life and the family mythology, searching for clues that could help make sense of Bret's spiraling depression and death. He reconsiders his relationship with his father, the poet William Stafford, and his own role as the wandering son. At the beginning of the memoir Stafford recalls his brother getting the pamphlet *100 Tricks Every Boy Can Do* from the back of a comic book. Bret quickly attempted the ultimate trick of pulling a tablecloth out from under a crystal glass. The result, of course, was millions of shards of glass. Stafford's trick is to undo, to restore the million fragments that exploded with Bret's suicide into some kind of coherent narrative. In eighty-nine vignettes that shine like polished stones below a rippling river, Stafford attempts to decipher the "tricks required to become a human being" (176) when life seems to have fractured beyond recognition. Like that other great western story of brotherhood and loss, Norman Maclean's *A River Runs through It*, Stafford's memoir wrestles with how we "can love completely without complete understanding."

Stafford's story cannot conjure up his brother's return to life, but it does perform the magic of memoir. Even when there are gaps that cannot be filled, voids that cannot be crossed, the act of telling the story can provide the "episodic evidence" that leans "toward understanding" (197) and holds the broken self together.

Jenny Emery Davidson
College of Southern Idaho, Hailey