

# Innovative Women Writers



**Daniel Green**

## NOTE

I present this selection of essays on current women writers whose work either could be called innovative, or raises important issues relative to the notion of experiment or innovation in fiction, without a lengthy preface because I believe that the connections among these writers emerge clearly enough when the essays are read in sequence, especially through the brief signals provided by the section headings. Ideally the reader would indeed read these essays in sequence (they have been arranged here with a purpose, and to some extent were initially written with the idea they might appear in a collection like this), but readers are certainly free to consider them individually as well. Whatever insights I may have to offer about a particular writer ought to be able to stand alone, or of course my effort has failed.

I have no overarching theory about the nature or direction of innovative writing by women writers, although as I do note in several of the essays in the first section, there is a recognizable affinity among numerous current writers for what I am here calling “fabulation.” Otherwise it seems to me that a representative sampling of writing by women today decidedly exhibits much variety in its outlook and eclecticism in its method. (Although this is not to say that in the essays that follow I always find the writer has successfully expressed that outlook or feel the writer's method is always sound.)

*Very often—too often, it seems to me—people are made to think they have to write in a particular way, and that they can't write about certain things. And it seems obvious that what's absolutely essential is that the creative process be guiltless. . .the idea being that you can write about anything at all, you just have to do it very well.*

--Rikki Ducornet

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Earlier versions of some of these essays were written for the following publications:

*Kenyon Review Online; Full Stop; The Quarterly Conversation; American Book Review*

## FABULATORS

### Rikki Ducornet

Rikki Ducornet's novels published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (so far *Gazelle* (2003), *Netsuke* (2011), and *Brightfellow* (2016) have discernibly evolved away from the more purely fabular kind of fiction—often veering into the surreal or fantastic—that characterized her previous work, toward more naturalistic settings and more recognizably “lifelike” characters. Although these later novels are by no means conventionally crafted “literary fiction,” they draw less noticeably on the structures and iconography of fairy tales and fables than the novels for which Ducornet initially became known, especially the “elements” tetralogy, *The Stain* (1984), *Entering Fire* (1986), *The Fountains of Neptune* (1989), and *The Jade Cabinet* (1993). The recognizable motifs introduced in the earlier books recur in these later ones, but they are now not tied directly to the more imaginatively colorful contexts in which they initially appeared.

These three novels seem as well more directly autobiographical in choice of character and setting, as if only after invoking the “monstrous and the marvelous,” as the title of her 1999 collection of essays has it, through emphatically invented worlds could Ducornet then turn to the monstrous and the marvelous in the actual world of experience. The early novels were, of course, ultimately grounded in experience, both personal to the author—the settings were greatly influenced by Ducornet's residence in a small French village, for example—and the very real human experience of wonder, cruelty, loss, and desire. In them, however, Ducornet chose to render human experience through undisguised fabulation, creating vivid characters who are nevertheless “flat” according to the prevailing assumptions of “depth” in characterization that inform most contemporary fiction. Ducornet's fiction is intensely concerned with the effects of psychological impulses and states of mind, but these manifest themselves in the tropes, images, and external action of her stories, which perform acts of imagination rather than laboriously simulate consciousness.

Ducornet's characteristic exercise of imagination has perhaps most frequently been described as a form of surrealism, and indeed her pervasive invocation of dreams and dreamlike situations certainly associated Ducornet's work with surrealism in its original incarnation (not simply as the general purpose term for literary works that don't strictly adhere to the protocols of realism it has largely become). But Ducornet's surrealist narratives do more than incorporate

hallucinatory imagery or uncanny events, although both are often featured. Instead they seamlessly integrate these elements within the formal conventions of folk and fairy tales, revealing not least the extent to which such stories themselves are inherently surreal in the way they draw on elemental fears and desires, and depict human experience in stark contrasts and distorted perspectives. Ducornet's fictions offer distinct oppositions (good/evil, innocence/experience) that allow for occasionally extravagant plot devices, and if novels like *The Stain* and *The Jade Cabinet* draw extensively on the allegorical resources of the fairy tale (as do the stories collected in *The Complete Butcher's Tales* (1980/1994) and 1997's *The Word "Desire"*), the aura of dream they induce also works to modify their allegorical content, suggesting a larger encompassing meaning but in its altered reality also partially concealing it.

The dreamlike element has been muted in *Gazelle*, *Netsuke*, and *Brightfellow*, although the reality depicted in each is far from ordinary, the characters engaged in extreme behaviors that are not so far removed from those depicted in the earlier novels. The stories take place in mid-20th century Cairo, a current-day psychiatrist's office and a college campus during the 1950s rather than "Dreamland" (as *Phosphor in Dreamland* (1995) explicitly identifies what in effect is the setting of all of Ducornet's previous fiction), but both the often destructive latent impulses and the potentially liberating possibilities made visible in dream worlds continue to be manifest in the characters, situations, and formal assumptions of Ducornet's most recent novels. Characters persist in being confused about the nature of their own desires, acting on them in heedless and hurtful ways, seeking to control and exploit others as a means of coping with a flawed sense of themselves and their place in the world. At the same time, wonder and beauty also exist, available to those willing to accept it, free of self-interest and the urge to possess.

*Netsuke* was a further departure from Ducornet's usual practice in that its protagonist is an adult (a middle-aged verging on elderly adult at that), although the psychoanalyst whose account of his own sexual exploitation of his patients (and concurrent mistreatment of his wife) is the focus of the novel certainly well represents the Ducornet character type who, through an apparent inability to become properly attuned to the influences of desire behaves at best in a manner indifferent to the needs and well-being of others (and in the case of the psychoanalyst, that is ultimately self-destructive as well). More often the protagonist is young, if not a child (as in *Gazelle*) then a youth on the cusp of maturity. *Brightfellow* is more in keeping with

Ducornet's characteristic depiction of a youthful perspective on the world the character inhabits, featuring a young man of 19 whose "world" is mostly restricted to a college campus, where he is a ghostlike presence after he leaves his troubled home and takes residence there, successfully occupying its nooks and crannies and avoiding discovery.

Given access to the college library, the young man, who is identified simply as "Stub," begins to read the works of an obscure anthropologist (and former professor at the college), an endeavor that pays off handsomely when one day Stub encounters an elderly man he presumes to be a retired professor and to avoid exposure claims he is an Australian student on a Fullbright scholarship studying the papers of this anthropologist, Verner Vanderloon. The professor, who insists that Stub call him "Billy," invites Stub to live with him for what Billy assumes will be the duration of his visit as an exchange student. Stub, adopting the pseudonym "Charter Chase," accepts, and for a while he flourishes in his new environment, cultivating with Billy what is obviously the most substantive human relationship Stub has ever experienced. In the meantime, however, Charter also develops a fascination with a young girl named Asthma, a fascination that quickly enough moves from heartfelt to creepy.

As a character, Stub/Charter seems most reminiscent of Nicholas, protagonist of *The Fountains of Neptune*, even though in that novel Nicholas is portrayed first as a nine year-old boy and then as a much older man who has awakened from the coma into which he fell after a near-drowning, a sleep lasting 50 years. Essentially each of these novels is a coming of age story (a favored narrative mode for Ducornet). Nicholas must cope with the emotional and psychological impulses of a pre-adolescent boy as he tries to catch up to his 60 year-old body; he has missed the maturation period that Stub is going through and must struggle to compensate. But where Nicholas finally succeeds in reconciling his mind/body split, Stub's passage to maturity is blocked by his own emotional impairment. Eventually Stub begins to fear his masquerade is about to be revealed, but even more devastating is his disillusionment with Asthma when he finds her engaging in activity inconsistent with his romanticized vision of her. One day he sees her playing with her friend, Pea Pod:

. . .He sees Asthma slap Pea Pod across the face with such force Pea Pod stumbles and falls, vanishing as if swallowed by the floor—only to rise and fly at Asthma and, like a wild thing released from its cage, bite her arm.

Charter turns away. Repulsed and despairing, he falls to his knees, his hands held to his ringing ears. . . He has seen something primal, grotesque. He has seen two little girls transformed into harpies before his eyes.

Not long afterward, Stub sees Asthma and Pea Pod again, but to him it is as if “he has seen the end of time. . . severed from what he has come to count on, what he has come to know.” Feeling “solitary now in new and expected ways,” Stub takes his leave of Billy and proceeds to set Asthma’s house on fire, pausing only long enough to watch Asthma leap from her bedroom window and become caught in a tree before he walks away from the campus and makes his way through the woods to an isolated house that turns out to be the house of Verner Vanderloon. The novel ends on Stub’s acceptance of Vanderloon’s invitation to spend the night. “And in the morning you will be telling me just what it is you’re wanting,” Vanderloon says.

The novel’s conclusion is sudden and disconcerting. It doesn’t work only if you believe it isn’t consistent with Stub’s character as presented in the rest of the novel, but his actions force us to reflect on our response to Stub until these moments. Initially we are no doubt inclined to sympathize with him, considering the circumstances of his childhood related in the first chapters: abusive and neglectful mother, bitterly resentful father, Stub constrained to act on his own resources at an early age. When Stub takes up residence on campus (the descriptions of which seem to directly reflect Ducornet’s own experience growing up as the daughter of a professor at Bard College) and shows his skill in surviving despite his utter isolation, many readers are likely to admire him, to be rooting for him to overcome the obstacles that life has so arbitrarily put in his way. Even when he assumes his false identity and begins to take advantage of Billy’s goodwill, we might feel that, however much Stub is engaging in deception, his attempts to better himself through self-education have been real and Billy is benefitting from Stub’s companionship as much as Stub benefits from the momentary stability Billy has provided. Moreover, that Stub comes to feel a genuine attachment to Billy seems undeniable.

Perhaps it is even possible to regard Stubb’s infatuation with Asthma, at least at first, as a sincere appreciation of her childhood innocence (leavened by her cheekier qualities, as she is not always entirely respectful, especially toward Stub, to whom she has given the nickname, “Brightfellow”). But long before Stub releases his barely suppressed yearning in a literal conflagration (which must also be called an act of attempted murder), it is apparent something

has gone awry in his psychic development, that his emotional wiring has become seriously crossed. If we are not quite prepared for him to lash out in such a deadly way, it finally should not really be a surprise that Stub's idyll would come to be spoiled, most likely by his own actions. Still, the novel's resolution is disturbing (a quality that should not be unfamiliar to long-time Ducornet readers), not least because Stub's story is presumably still unresolved, or at least resolved only to continue, slightly revised in a different setting.

But this conclusion might provoke us not just to consider what lies ahead for Stub but also return to our initial view of him as an infant, left alone and playing on a linoleum floor: "He doesn't know how beautiful he is," the narrator tells us. "He doesn't know he's lonely and that his fear is not of his own making, that it will haunt him for the rest of his life. It will impede him years from now—twist and turn him just as an incessant wind twists and turns a tree—just as it will in unexpected ways nourish him. Yes: it will both nourish and impede him. And this is a terrible thing. How can he undo such a tangle?"

Since we have not yet been given illustration of the source of Stub's fear, or just what makes such fear "a terrible thing," it might be easy to take this lament as just part of an expository invocation, a lyrical flourish designed to suggest a kind of generic innocence, but Ducornet has actually provided the solution to the final mystery of Stub's behavior at the beginning. The fear is not simply the fear of being abandoned or mistreated (both of which he suffers nonetheless), but a fear, bred from the inherent hostility he absorbs from his surroundings, of fully asserting the sort of allegiance to imagination we find him expressing as a child, as "the linoleum swells with stories" he is inventing. Consequently, his orientation to the world, to his own experience of the world, is warped, along with his relationships to other people. "At home his isolation deepens," we are told just before Stub leaves it for his new existence lurking in the shadows of the campus. "But instead of dying, his affections are displaced."

Those displaced affections find their ultimate displacement when Stub meets Asthma. In the solitude he has been unable to escape, his conception of beauty and wonder has not advanced beyond the childish versions he acquired while entertaining himself on the linoleum. Finally Stub's interest in Asthma is not really sexual (although no doubt his post-pubescent libido has a role in coloring his interest), but instead he has idealized her from an infantilized perspective

(probably reflecting Stub's forced separation from Jenny, his live-in babysitter) that demands reality conform to Stub's imagined perfection. One could say that Stub's assumption of an invented identity is also a manifestation of his impaired sense of the role of imagination, an attempt to bring his spectral reality into actual existence through an act of make-believe.

But the primordial fear has indeed nourished Stub as well. If his presence in the world is askew, he is also undeniably resourceful, curious, and self-reliant. He skulks behind the façade of the college and its campus because he could never really participate in the routine, if often hypocritical and tawdry, life he observes on and around it. For better or worse, he is different, more alert and alive than those around him who are otherwise privileged to lead a "normal" life. Finally Stub is a character whose spirit has accommodated both the monstrous and the marvelous, so much so that they threaten to become indistinguishable. This makes him one of Ricki Ducornet's most compelling characters, and the reason why *Brightfellow* leaves such a lingering impression.

### **Aimee Bender**

There are really two writers at work in the fiction of Aimee Bender. First and most conspicuously we find the fabulist, who frequently invests her stories with a surface surrealism by evoking fables and fairy tales. The surreal qualities of her tales might be more pronounced and extreme (a human woman marries an ogre and begets ogre children) or more restrained and less insistent (as in both of her novels), but anyone who reads her collections of short stories in particular would have to conclude she is a writer partial to devices that enhance and distort reality. Nevertheless, there is also a realist lurking beneath the surface of Bender's surreal narratives, a writer who uses the surreal plot turns and fairy tale motifs to render middle-class American life in a way that remains faithful to its underlying configurations and habitual behaviors.

The surrealist Bender ("magical realist" is also a term that she has accepted as a description of her method) undeniably has been influential on other writers (particularly younger women writers), but while arguably her influence was felt strongly because her fiction seemed a significant departure from the norms of the minimalism and neorealism that dominated short fiction in the 1980s and 1990s, she is certainly not the first contemporary writer to work in the anti-realist mode inspired by fairy tales. Such postmodern writers as Robert Coover and Steven

Millhauser have consistently practiced this sort of fabulism, but it is in the work of British writer Angela Carter that we really see the comprehensive appropriation of the fairy tale in order to fashion an invigorating and innovative form of what Robert Scholes called "fabulation." Her stories and novels exploit the elemental patterns and iconography of fairy tales to create very modern (not to mention very adult) works of aesthetically sophisticated fiction.

Bender is clearly enough influenced by Carter, although her approach, and especially her style, are much different than Carter's, in some ways their total opposite. Where Carter bends, twists, and transforms the conventions of the fairy tale, in a prose that is equally sinuous and startling, Bender more or less borrows these conventions and their attendant imagery in order to use them as extensions of her focus on the conflicts of ordinary life, and her prose is generally ordinary as well, more concerned simply with relating the bizarre plot turns than with enlisting language in the effort to transfigure entrenched narrative practice. Where Carter seemed inspired to assimilate the fairy tale in order to expand the formal possibilities of "serious" fiction, Bender seems content simply to invoke anti-realist strategies already recognizable from the work of writers such as Kafka, Marquez, and Carter herself.

In this way Bender's fiction contrasts as well with that of Rikki Ducornet, Angela Carter's most immediate and, in my view, most accomplished successor. Ducornet is rarely mentioned in discussions of Bender's books (or in interviews with Bender herself), so it must be assumed that whatever effect Ducornet's work may have had on Bender is either minimal or just gets lost in the citation of her other influences (which would not be surprising given the general neglect of Ducornet, both as an important writer in general and specifically as an important innovative woman writer). Like Carter, Ducornet uses fabulation as embodied in the fairy tale to create transformed fictional worlds, worlds that are not merely "unreal" but in fact are very real in their integrity as verbal-aesthetic inventions. Partly through her active, vibrant prose style and partly through her dynamic imagination, Ducornet makes us feel we are authentically inhabiting the fabricated world her fiction collectively invokes.

This is not really what Aimee Bender seems to be after. If her fiction does show imagination, it is imagination with a limited effect, the use of a surreal device almost as if it were a kind of trope, a flourish added to the text, not part of a larger effort to create a completely different kind of formal order, one in which such devices would not be the alternative means to

the same narrative purposes. Not all of Bender's fiction in fact makes use of these devices. Her first novel in particular, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2001), is essentially a work of straightforward realism, albeit one with a "quirky" cast of characters and an "offbeat" situation. Other of her stories contain few if any surreal or fantastic touches, and these more conventional narratives reflecting a more familiar kind of workshop realism allow us to recognize that the surrealism in Bender's fiction complements its realism more than subverts it. Where the realism of middle-class anxiety and dysfunction leaves off, the whimsical distortion of magical realism takes up.

Perhaps this strategy is best illustrated in Bender's second novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* (2010). Finally this is a novel about the hidden discontents of the American nuclear family, but rather than treat that subject as domestic drama, Bender creates an extended fantasia in which familial unhappiness is revealed not through specific conflict but via a supernatural plot device whereby each member of the family has been endowed with a special power--the daughter and protagonist of the novel is able to "read" food, to determine the emotional state of the person who prepared it, while her brother, we eventually discover, has the ability to disappear into inanimate objects, a power that ultimately he apparently exercises for good, as he vanishes and is not heard from again. Thus does the sadness, disappointment, and desperation that afflict this family become concrete through the fantasy device—at least to us, although not so directly for the family itself, except the daughter, who otherwise undergoes her journey of maturation more or less quietly, even if her brother's final fate does provide the novel with a creepy enough denouement.

Probably readers find this variation on the bildungsroman effective to the extent they can credit the fantastic elements of the premise. I confess to finding the protagonist's peculiar form of sixth sense an initially intriguing and potentially fruitful literary stratagem, but when Bender expands the trope to encompass the whole family's spooky endowments, the effect mutes the trope's signifying capacity, reducing it to a gimmick that finally can't maintain the integrity of its own quirk, leaving the novel itself stranded awkwardly between whimsical fantasy and a kind of naturalistic family drama in which the family can't escape its hereditary defect. This makes the subplot involving the protagonist's brother less mysterious than melodramatic, heavy-handed rather than horrifying. Indeed, when the protagonist encounters her brother in his apartment as he

is in the process of literally disappearing into the chair he sits in, an episode that is clearly meant to be uncanny is really so overwrought as to seem inescapably silly.

In some of Bender's stories, whimsy wins out over all other tonal qualities. "Ironhead," for example, surely among her most surreal stories, tells the tale of a family of pumpkinheads who unaccountably sire a baby with an ironhead instead. The boy feels horribly out of place, of course, and the story pulls heavily at our heartstrings in provoking feelings of pity for the poor lad:

The ironhead turned out to be a very gentle boy. He played quietly on the his own in the daytime with clay and dirt, and contrary to expectations, he preferred wearing ragged messy clothes with wrinkles. His mother tried once to smooth down his outfits with her own, separated iron, but when the child saw what was his head, standing by itself, with steam exhaling from the flat silver base just like his breath, he shrieked a tinny scream and matching steam streamed from his chin as it did when he was particularly upset. . . .

A passage like this comes perilously close to, if it doesn't topple over completely into, a cartoon-like sentimentality. The remainder of the story doesn't really advance beyond this level of emotional engagement. Once we've registered the notion that a boy has been born with an iron for a head, the story has little more to offer. It continues to rely on faux-naïve phrasing ("a very gentle boy," "played quietly") and an altogether formulaic plot—the iron-headed boy dies, of course, leaving everyone very sad. In another story in the same book (*Willful Creatures*), "The End of the Line," a "big man" goes to a pet store "to buy himself a little man to keep him company." This rather tepidly surrealist premise established, again the story proceeds in a fairly predictable, and rather mawkish, fashion. The big man begins to torture the little man, who contemplates his escape but is unable to accomplish it. The big man sets the little man free, but decides to follow him as he drives away in a "small blue bus"—he "just wanted to see where they lived." A (literally) little girl looks up at the "giant" who has found them and wonders at the "size of the pity that kept unbuckling in her heart."

For a "parable" like this to work, in my opinion, it either has to implicitly examine the structural and thematic assumptions of the parable itself (in the process reconfiguring the possibilities of the form) or it has to manifest some stylistic vigor to compensate for the formulaic nature of parables and fables. Carter and Ducornet, as well as, say, Borges, Calvino, or

Donald Barthelme, are writers who readily perform each of these tasks, but Bender's stories do neither. Beneath the ultimately superficial distortions of ordinary reality, plot conventions associated with the fabulative mode are preserved more or less unselfconsciously, and the stories are related in a flat and affectless style that mostly keeps the reader's attention on the developing actions. (Narrated in the first person, Bender's two novels are somewhat less illustrative of this style.) It's as if the author wants to urgently draw our attention to the strange events unfolding in these stories, except that they're related in such low intensity language they seem strangely uninteresting.

Bender's most recent book, the story collection *The Color Master*, is generally of a piece with her two previous collections, containing stories by both the realist and the surrealist Bender. A number of the former are first-person narratives, and thus the stylistic tenor of the book as a whole is more varied than *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* or *Willful Creatures*. Among the realist stories "The Fake Nazi" and "The Doctor and the Rabbi" are perhaps the most effective, in each case managing to appropriately evoke strong emotions in contexts that might seem inauspicious ("The Fake Nazi," about a man who falsely accuses himself of having been a Nazi) or hopelessly grandiose ("The Doctor and the Rabbi," about the title characters talking about God), while "Tiger Mending" seems impossibly twee, succumbing to the kind of sentimentality that mars many of Bender's surreal fables. The best story in the book is the title story, a "prequel" of sorts to the French fairy tale, "Donkeyskin." It is a story that recalls the work of Carter or Ducornet more than any other of Bender's fairy tale-derived fictions in its imaginative expansion of this particular fairy tale.

In my view, Aimee Bender's fiction is more important as a sign of a shift in sensibility among current writers than a significant aesthetic achievement advancing the cause of innovative fiction. Her stories, beginning with the debut collection, *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* (1998), announced that an alternative to minimalist realism was available, a call that later writers such as Karen Russell, Kate Bernheimer and Joanna Ruocco clearly heeded. Whether these writers will ultimately ratify and extend the legacy of Carter and Ducornet more convincingly than has Bender herself is still to be determined, but unless Aimee Bender is freshly inspired to transcend the limitations of the strategies she has continued to employ so far, her work is unlikely to be a further part of that effort.

## Joanna Ruocco

In 1979, Robert Scholes published *Fabulation and Metafiction*, in retrospect perhaps the work of literary criticism most influential in shaping our perspective on “postmodern” or “experimental” fiction from the 1960s and ’70s. The fiction of this period, according to Scholes, systematically swerves away from realism toward the more elemental mode of fabulation, inspired literally by the fable rather than by modern realism and intent on “telling such truths as fiction may legitimately tell in ways which are appropriately fictional,” unafraid of imaginative distortion or outright fantasy. Although Scholes saw fabulation and metafiction as linked, twin sides of the same experimental coin (indeed, he defines “metafiction” as “experimental fabulation”), the experimental impulse in American fiction has subsequently found expression separately in these two modes.

“Metafiction” as practiced by such writers as John Barth and Gilbert Sorrentino highlights the artificiality of traditional narrative, implicitly appealing to the “ingenuity of the fabulation” (as Scholes puts it) in substituting its own artifice for the traditional artifice of “story” (in Barth’s case attempting to renew narrative by exploiting its “exhaustion”). While this sort of self-reflexivity has continued to be common and appears even in more mainstream fiction, in the past fifteen to twenty years there has been among many avowedly experimental writers a conspicuous turn instead to a purer kind of fabulation. Whether the surrealist fairy tales of Aimee Bender, the satirical parables of George Saunders, or the science fiction–tinged magical realism of Kelly Link, to name just three of the more prominent such writers, this sort of narrative, non-realist but still leaning on plot, has most consistently claimed the legacy of the kind of experimental fiction Scholes identified.

Among those writers devoting themselves to the fabulative mode clearly would have to be included Joanna Ruocco. Her most recent novel, *Dan*, is set in the fictional village named in the title, which itself seems to exist somewhere aslant reality as we know it, occupying a place on the border between the almost plausible and the mostly dreamlike. The characters in the novel likewise are at once both recognizably human and figures from the simplified world of the fable, including the protagonist, Melba Zuzzo, who on the one hand resembles the innocent maiden of a fairy tale, but on the other reacts to the dangers she encounters with a kind of incomprehension not so much expressing fear as a kind of confusion, as if she thinks her own inability to

understand is to blame: her apprehensions arise not from the perception that her world is menacing, but from the possibility that it might be meaningless.

The novel follows Melba over the course of a day in Dan. While this day certainly proves to be an eventful one for Melba, those events are framed less as Melba's story than as its dissolution, the ultimate denial of further development in her "character arc." Melba's experience bitterly answers the question posed at the novel's beginning:

Melba Zuzzo stood in the yard chewing tiredly on several pieces of gum. The day had barely started, and, as soon as it was over, another day was bound to begin. When would it end?

The novel's conclusion suggests that it ends, both literally and figuratively, with *Dan's* final words, and not just for the reader. As the narrative of Melba's day proceeds, it quickly comes to seem that Melba has a fragile sense of herself and her place in Dan, indeed a very shaky grasp on the concept of existence itself—as reflected in a recalled conversation with her teacher Mr. Sack, to whom she declares, "I have a problem. . . I just can't figure out what time is made of."

If it feels to Melba that time "must be like a kind of jelly," as she further suggests, that is because Dan is in part the sort of provincial, backwater town in which life does indeed move slowly and in established patterns. But those patterns, while routinized, are off-kilter, seemingly normal to Melba and the inhabitants of Dan but odd and arbitrary from the reader's perspective. Details of this skewed world emerge with deadpan regularity:

Melba had looked around her mother's kitchen. For years, snails had been wearing runnels in the floorboards, and in these runnels, Melba could see several dozen snails in transit. . . .

Mr. Sack, the history and phrenology teacher, did not believe in text books. Instead, he distributed modeling clay, which the students used to shape the noses of 19<sup>th</sup> century naval heroes. . . .

"You're not like the other children, Melba," said Gigi Zuzzo. "You react poorly to elastics. Whenever you are given a piece of elastic your nose begins to bleed. I blame factors from your birth. Namely, your abnormally long umbilical cord."

Melba herself simply accepts the weirdness of her world, but she is nevertheless dissatisfied with what she perceives as the underlying uniformity of her existence. “You’re right,” she says in a conversation with one of the inhabitants of Dan:

I’m always waiting. It’s because I’m confused about what’s happening. Life can’t possibly be just what’s happening right now. Then you’d be right, it would be just the two of us in the cold street, talking. This would be the whole thing. It’s only waiting that makes it more than that. I’d say remembering too, but you can’t trust memories.

Despite Melba’s reservations about the reliability of memory, the story of her day is structured precisely as a narrative of “waiting,” her experience of Dan’s all-too-familiar presence alternating with moments in which she is seized by an episode of “remembering,” usually prompted by something she observes. Like Melba, we readers wait to see what she will encounter next, what we will come to understand about this peculiar place in which she lives, although never does it really seem that we are in the midst of a conventionally developing “plot.”

Melba’s plaint that “Life can’t possibly be just what’s happening right now” certainly puts her in conflict with the prevailing attitude in Dan, however, whose people do indeed seem wholly oriented to the present, so much so that the past seems swathed in the sort of cloudiness that hovers over the mountains surrounding the town, most disturbingly illustrated in the case of those people Melba recalls simply vanishing, a phenomenon the citizens of Dan have apparently taken in stride, provoking little curiosity or concern among them. Indeed, Melba’s references to these events and her clear resistance to the general complacency otherwise characteristic of Dan make her an object of suspicion. This suspicion and impatience is filtered mostly through the men she meets in the course of her activities (although she is castigated for her shortcomings most vociferously by her own mother), introducing the possibility that Melba’s status in Dan is especially precarious because she’s a woman.

Certainly it is tempting to regard *Dan* as a novel employing the allegorical or symbolic mode that can perhaps be taken as partly a feminist fable. Not only does the narrative conjure the atmosphere and attributes of a clearly make-believe world, a large part of this effect is achieved by Ruocco’s deliberately artless prose, its simple, straightforward diction and emphasis on declarative sentences without much figurative ornamentation. It is language that mimics the manner of a fairy tale, as if the primary effect of Melba’s experience of Dan has been to

infantilize her, as evoked by the ingenuousness with which the third-person narrator conveys Melba's awareness. Yet Dan has infantilized everyone who lives there, or at least lulled them into accepting existing conditions, however puzzling or arbitrary, as essentially inescapable. (Indeed, "the only way to leave is to go nowhere," Melba is told.) At the novel's end, we find Melba laid out on an examining table, exposed perhaps to some final degradation at the behest of Dan's male authority. Yet the details of this final scene are typically enigmatic, and the scene might just as easily be interpreted as a kind of metafictional apotheosis: "The paper on this table is just like the paper I used for my drawing," Melba declares. In the last view we have of her, "She felt the paper moving beneath her, and she lay very still on top of it, not saying anything, not moving at all," as if Melba is being imprinted on the paper, returning her to the domain of artistic creation from which she came.

It is difficult to say that by the novel's conclusion Melba has found the "meaning" she desires. As well, the meaning of Joanna Ruocco's fabulist novel is elusive, dispersed and deflected through its surreal imagery and motifs. A story with all the markings of an allegorical fable, it is closer to the kind of fabulation Scholes identifies in the work of Donald Barthelme, in which an apparent symbol really "symbolizes symbolism, reducing it to absurdity." If Ruocco's fiction doesn't quite exhibit the formal or stylistic audacity of Barthelme's, it does similarly compel us to register its motifs and images in their immediate and literal manifestation (in, as it were, their denotative state), without subordinating them to an external representational or symbolic order where they find their true significance. Ultimately *Dan* fails to deliver the kind of clear-cut moral traditionally associated with a fable, but this failure is actually a measure of its success.

### **Angela Woodward**

Angela Woodward is a younger writer who clearly belongs to the group of innovative women writers who could be designated as fabulators, writers who tend toward undisguised fabulism as their chosen form of departure from conventional practice. Like Joanna Ruocco, Danielle Dutton, or Helen Oyeyemi, she favors fanciful, dreamlike worlds appropriate to fables and fairy tales, although similarly to, say, Ruocco, it is the ambience and mannerisms of allegorical fantasy that this fiction seeks to incorporate, not the underlying symbolic structure that allows an allegorical narrative to abstract a higher level of meaning ("the moral of the

story”). For this mode of radical fabulism, the main object of subversion is “realism” conceived as fidelity to reality in its familiar aspect, subject to the know laws of causation, and in the fiction of the neofabulists this reality is freely transformed through the unfettered exercise of imagination.

Woodward’s *Natural Wonders*, like her previous novel, *End of the Fire Cult*, ultimately tells a story about a rather familiar subject—the stresses, strains, and uncertainties of marriage—but does so obliquely, through sidelong suggestion, as the relationships between the characters are filtered by and mirrored in narratives not directly relating those relationships (although the narrator/editor of *Natural Wonders* does provide us with some specific details about the course of her marriage to the novel’s ostensible protagonist). *End of The Fire Cult* most purely executes this strategy, indirectly telling us the story of the decline of its twin characters’ marriage through an elaborate exchange of stories about imaginary countries each of them invents. The conflicts between the countries correspond to conflicts in the marriage, although of course this is something the reader must deduce after accepting the novel’s unorthodox conceit. In this case, it’s the possibility of allegorical content in a narrative that the author exploits, but it’s the reader who adds meaning by reading closely enough to note the parallels and underlying connections.

*Natural Wonders* is somewhat less allusive than *End of the Fire Cult*, although in it as well what the novel at first seems to be about is not finally its literal subject. We immediately encounter what seems to be an academic lecture:

BENJY, FIRST SLIDE, PLEASE

Let me tell you about the age of the earth, he said. The English scientists worked together diligently and announced that the earth had been created on October 26, 4004 B.C. at nine in the morning. Out of formless mud, the sun rose and spread its light, the animals got to their feet and began wandering around the fields. Trees arched up, leaves unfolded out of their twigs and cast shadows on the meadow irises, purple flags wavering under the nostrils of curious gazelles.

In the second chapter, however, we learn that this is one of many lectures given by a professor (the narrator refers to him simply as “Jonathan”), now deceased, in his course on Earth and Prehistory. (We discover that the professor’s particular area of scientific expertise is “jaw

measurement.”) The professor’s widow, Jenny, has been asked by his department chair to put together a “definitive edition” of her husband’s lectures as a memorial. Ultimately, however, she cannot help embellishing the lectures with scenes dramatizing his classroom presentations, his students’ responses, and episodes from her late husband’s courtship of her and their subsequent marriage.

Jonathan taught primarily an undergraduate course focusing on early scientific efforts to understand the “natural wonders” of the earth. Frequently the lectures center around a prominent scientific figure such as Louis Aggasiz, at other times they focus on more obscure figures, such as the astrophysicist Milutin Milankovitch, who calculated “the exact amount of the sun’s heat that had reached the earth at any time in its long history.” The lectures are more often fairly colorful and involved stories rather than recitation of facts, as when a crew of shipwrecked Portuguese sailors are introduced to a vegetarian diet by a “tribe of wild, matted-haired men” they encounter on the coast of India. When the ship finally returns to Portugal, the crew eagerly return to eating meat, but “meat didn’t taste the same. It had about it the possibility of not eating it, its negative, like a ghost on the stairs. Regret was its horrible aftertaste.”

This lecture arises from Jonathan’s interest in eating practices (thus his specialization), but one can ask how exactly Jenny is able to reconstruct the story, along with Jonathan’s asides, his habitual manner, and the responses of his students (often puzzled, at times uncomprehending), especially when Jenny herself says “It’s not easy to be his editor” due to the lack of clarity in the notes with which she is working. Indeed, finally the novel becomes as much about Jenny’s effort to bring her husband to life through imagination (partly that manifested by Jonathan in his lectures, partly her own) than about either Jonathan himself or the subjects of his lectures. Whether the portrait that emerges has much fidelity to the “real” Jonathan—likely it doesn’t—is less important than what it tells us about Jenny’s need to give Jonathan, and perhaps their marriage, a dignity he—and it—might not have possessed. She may also be attempting to persuade herself that she had good reasons to marry him in the first place (or realizing that she did not).

“We were both of us foolish, him for falling in love with me, me for not putting him off for his own good,” Jenny tells us early on, as she contemplates the attitude Jonathan’s colleagues take toward her following his death. In her own characterizations of the marriage Jenny

confesses that whatever passion that might have existed at the beginning dissipated rather quickly:

. . . One morning as I left for work, he turned in to kiss my cheek, and I swerved sideways. As we both righted ourselves, our cheeks passed by each other, only a few inches apart, so that my refused intimacy nevertheless took me through the field of his heat, the smell of his scalp and shaving cream. A few months earlier, I might have inhaled with something like pleasure, or at least nostalgia for the early moments of our love affair. Now it was a relief to be just outside his orbit.

When Jenny immediately follows this fragment of memory that opens a chapter with Jonathan's lecture on "geologic time" ("the scale of it all takes some imagination to comprehend," she has him announce), it is evident that her mission to memorialize her husband's work and her unavoidable reflections on a marriage that seems increasingly impalpable to her have merged into a narrative meditation on the inscrutable agency of time, the natural wonder of the ways human beings attempt to reckon with its force.

Ultimately *Natural Wonders* is less conceptually audacious in its formal conceit than *End of the Fire Cult*, and perhaps this is why eventually interest lags: the novel proves more readily assimilable to conventional expectations, even if it doesn't really have a plot and the central relationship is "developed" only in the most implied and indirect manner. Readers who prefer fiction that is "about" something and invites emotional engagement would not be disappointed with *Natural Wonders*, although they must be willing to read more actively and imaginatively than a typically "immersive" novel might ask. This novel could without serious distortion be called a love story, albeit more about the natural wonder of its absence than its presence. Still, it finds a way to relate such a story that takes us beyond the familiar means of rehearsing it.

## **THE MOVEMENT OF LANGUAGE**

### **Noy Holland**

Although the influence of Gordon Lish as editor and teacher has extended to a wide range of seemingly disparate writers, one group seems to be especially sensitive to Lish's influence. Writers such as Gary Lutz, Diane Williams, Christine Schutt, and Noy Holland palpably employ, in somewhat different but observable ways, the strategy Lish calls "consecution," the focus on

constructing and linking sentences by considering sound and rhythm as well as sense. Indeed, these writers no doubt take the strategy farther than Lish himself even envisioned, at least in their intensive focus on the sonic qualities of language, resulting in short stories (all but Schutt work almost exclusively in the short story, but her best work may also be her short fiction) using an alternative mode of composition through which “character” and “story” are not abandoned but emerge as the afterthought of the movement of language, the characters and plots subordinated to the autonomy of that movement.

From this shared commitment to more fully exploring the linguistic resources of the sentence as a literary device, each of these writers draws on those resources in their own way, with different stylistic signatures that also create divergent larger-scale formal effects. Although all four writers work in narrative fragments, Williams’s stories are both the most highly compressed and the most elliptical. Her brief fictions especially require very close attention to the materiality of their sentences (including their sound), each one of which might be an episode in itself, the interval between them a leap in time or place. The same is true of Lutz’s early work, although more recently his stories have gotten longer, even if Lutz’s sentences are more notable for their utterly singular wordplay than for advancing clearly discernible plots. Lutz is perhaps the writer among this group who has most assiduously developed the strategy of consecution taken from Lish, while Christine Schutt might be described as the most “lyrical” prose stylist (although her prose is ultimately not so conventional in its carefully cadenced lyricism, which in its way is as sensitive to the intricacies of sound and syntax as Lutz’s more unpredictable sentences). Schutt’s novels in particular come closest to fulfilling traditional expectations of plot and character, but the reader who approaches her fiction simply for its narrative interest and who fails to appreciate what Lutz, in his essay “The Sentence is a Lonely Place,” calls the “page hugging” appeal of Schutt’s writing will surely miss out on a significant element of its achievement and effect.

The stories in Noy Holland’s, *Swim for the Little One First*, are not as brief as Williams’s pieces, although they do have something of their enigmatic quality; they are not as verbally adventurous as Lutz’s stories, which does not mean they are less scrupulous in their attention to language; they do not develop plot and character as transparently as Schutt’s fiction does, but Holland incorporates linear narrative more than either Williams or Lutz. While such short pieces

as “Blood Country” and “The Last Doll Never Opens” could be described as closer to surreal fables (or even prose poems), the most evocative and most compelling of the stories in *Swim for the Little One First* are the longer ones, generally both more extended in time and more specific to place. In these stories, a cogent narrative generally does emerge, unfolding as well in a recognizable setting, often the American West. However, because they are developed through extremely truncated fragments (sometimes only a single sentence), containing little in the way of direct exposition, the stories can seem impressionistic and elusive. With some, it is only after coming to the end of the story that one realizes Holland’s individually arresting sentences have told us a story after all.

The book’s first story, “Pachysandra,” works in this way. We track the narrator as she returns to her girlhood desert home to care for Rose (presumably her sister, although the relationship remains somewhat oblique). While there, she begins a sexual relationship with Rudy—“the help”—by whom she becomes pregnant, but subsequently she terminates the pregnancy (“I went to the hospital and had them scrape what Rudy gave me out”), even though at the beginning of the story she had been trying to become pregnant with her boyfriend, Tonto. We are not likely to forget this introductory episode, since the narrator’s activity is presented to us in an especially memorable formulation:

Rose called.

I said, “Hello, Rose.”

“You sound funny.”

I was lying on my back with my legs in the air trying to make a baby with my mister. I had his seed in there. My poor egg had stepped out to meet it.

By the end, the narrator has changed her mind about this effort:

I would not have been much of a mother. I went for shitbags. I liked to sleep late. I liked people who could work their own spoon.

While sentences like these do not exhibit the breaks in logic or continuity that frequently make Williams’s sentences so startling, or lead to the radical linguistic transformations that make us stop and linger over Lutz’s, they are surely not submerged into the ordinary flow of

expository discourse characterizing most conventional narratives. They indeed ask us to pause and appreciate the way they avoid familiar phrasing and routine idioms in favor of a directness of expression both trenchant (“I liked people who could work their own spoon”) and almost ingenuous (“I had his seed in there”) but that also encompass unorthodox but quite satisfying figurative turns (“My poor egg had stepped out to meet it”). Because it does seem the expected sort of invisible prose has been deliberately avoided, passages such as these can seem odd or eccentric, but upon reflection they are in fact quite precise and evocative, fully coherent, if self-enclosed, in their fidelity to the isolated moments they attempt to invoke.

Since they provide us with more such moments, the longer stories afford us greater opportunity to appreciate what such passages are up to, as well as the way Holland assembles them into narratives in which much of the story occurs in the gaps between these articulated moments but are if anything more powerful because of that. “Luckies Like Us” ultimately relates the story of a family that has suffered devastating misfortune, focusing on the aftermath of an automobile accident that has left a son in a vegetative state. The story alternates between moments centered on the perspectives of the mother (who feels responsible for the accident), the father, and a daughter. The overlapping of perspectives allows us to integrate the characters’ ongoing attempt to cope with their situation with the “backstory” that has produced it, a strategy that, along with Holland’s stark and pointed language, makes what could be a potentially sentimentalized, emotionally facile story resonate through an emotional restraint that is ultimately all the more effective in conveying the family’s desperate plight. Indeed, Holland’s stories do not indulge in easy emotions, even if the bleak emotional atmosphere in many of them can be chilling. The characters face difficult circumstances and often suffer grim fates, but they neither struggle heroically to overcome their difficulties and thus inspire our admiration nor merely succumb to them passively and provoke mere pity. They do what they can, which more than anything else also makes them seem intensely human.

“Merengue” presents a decidedly non-sentimental portrait of a senior citizen community in Florida whose residents once led vital lives, but

Now they went about on tricycles and wheelchairs, the want to drift still in them. The old women played bridge and bickered by day and by nightfall slept with the louvers pinched shut. The old toms howled on the beach at night. The old men fished with kittens.

The area itself has seen better days as well. Once “starlets arrived in gold lame with their hair heaped up on their heads,” but then “the young went elsewhere. The sea ate the beach. Hotels were looted, emptied out but for squatters with their shopping carts and rags.” Two wandering lovers, Jack and Mary, arrive “from the land of head-high corn.” Mary is pregnant, about which Jack is, to say the least, ambivalent. Jack eventually becomes impatient with his new surroundings as well, which seem to him “like a nursing home without nurses,” but Mary is taken up by the old men, on whom she does seem to have a softening effect. Mary is subsequently gang-raped by local teenagers, and not only loses her baby but is told she will no longer be able to have children (her fate inviting a contrast with that of the narrator of “Pachysandra”). The story is the longest in the book, and it shows how Holland’s sentence-based fragments can very effectively expand over a larger canvas, creating an ultimate depth of character and situation that, in this case, makes the story’s somber conclusion affecting without descending into melodrama. “Merengue” has the length of a short story, but some of the scope and density of a novel.

The best story in the book, the title story, has a similar scope and density, although it is about half as long. It is also the most formally interesting work in this collection. At first we are tempted to think the narrator is addressing us in the story’s first few lines:

How nice you could come to visit. See our home, how we live, how the leaves sweep down. The fields green still.

We turned out clocks back. I brought squash in, tossed a sheet across the withering vines. We’re to expect a frost once the wind quits, wind from the north, flurries. A chance.

We’ll move the rabbits in the morning, light the stove. Chicory in your coffee, honey how you like. On the radio the news.

It becomes apparent, however, that the narrator is addressing her father, who has come to live with her. The story continues to be told as a direct address to the father, during which his frayed relations with his family are revealed to us, including a troubled relationship with his only son, the narrator’s brother, which culminated in the son’s suicide. In the compressed time of its telling, as the father is moving in, we nevertheless learn much about the family history and

especially about the brother's suicide, the details of which seem irrepressibly to emerge as the narrator speaks on, showing the father around the house. The family's life is nicely captured in the story's final lines:

If there is anything you want — someone will get it for you.

My daughter will. Your wife will, or I will. Somebody always has.

Even as the narrator summons up the past and evokes the present, her words come to us shaped by Holland's attention to the rhythms her sentences set up both within and among themselves (and to which she clearly pays great attention), as well as to such auditory qualities as alliteration ("Chicory in your coffee, honey how you'd like") and to rhetorical devices such as repetition. *Swim for the Little One First* confirms Noy Holland to be a writer who can start with this sensitivity to language and use it to build formally intricate fictions that are also a great pleasure to read.

### **Julie Reverb**

It is not surprising that one of the blurbs for Julie Reverb's debut novel, *No Moon* (appearing on the publisher's page—Calamari Archive—for the book), is from Gary Lutz. While I do not know if the two writers are acquainted, or if Reverb would explicitly claim Lutz as an influence, certainly her prose can be reminiscent of Lutz's sonically charged, syntactically ingenious sentences:

Ted hammered the priest's mean pulse. He'd cottoned only Billy's beating and the blind eye turning. The priest was a gummy one; the psalms whistled through his gaps in Mass. Nothing but the drone of phoning it in. Jill stayed quiet or didn't know.

The sound effects in this passage are distinct, if lightly applied. The alliteration--"priests. . .pulse," "Billy's beating. . .blind eye"--draws the reader's attention immediately, but pausing to take in more of the paragraph's aural devices reveals the sibilance of sentence three and the internal rhyming of "drone" and "phoning." The syntax is unorthodox--"the blind eye turning"--if not momentarily confounding--"whistled through his gaps in Mass"--but ultimately quite pleasingly evocative: If we're not sure about the "gaps in Mass," surely "the drone of phoning it in" tells us all we need to know about the priest's performance.

Reverb's prose style, which could be described as self-consciously literary (at least in the sense that the author is quite clearly concerned with the sound and structure of her sentences), at first might seem a curious choice for depicting the fictional world of *No Moon*, which is altogether tawdry and uncultivated. The story, which is told in a sidelong, elliptical way, freely moving between past and present, centers on Lucy, an exotic dancer and prostitute, and Billy, a disabled man who falls in love with Lucy and tries to build a grand burlesque show around her in an old movie theater turned seedy strip club. The effort comes to naught when the gangster-ish club owner finally discovers what Billy is up to and closes down the show as Billy is trying to introduce it on opening night (after Billy has already failed to even find a print shop willing to print his crude poster advertising the event). As the novel concludes, the club is burning and Lucy has suffered a complete mental breakdown.

The meticulous intricacy of *No Moon's* style has the effect of distancing us from the otherwise abject characters and their degraded milieu, so that we don't really feel we are getting to "know" the characters intimately, in a way that would enhance feelings of sympathy for them (indeed, the effect of the novel's ending is in part determined by our lack of complete knowledge about Lucy). Nor is the shabby environment described with the kind of focus meant to evoke a "gritty" realism in depicting such a marginalized district. The novel doesn't "poeticize" its subject, but it does resist both sentimentality and a mocking irony and instead provides its own kind of authenticity through the aesthetic integrity of the prose, which offers its alternative but cogent representation of the characters' lives as well as the setting in which those lives have been determined.

*No Moon* is a slim novel, but it is "minimalist" only in size, not in the scope of its portrayal of human experience or the ambition of its writing. The sort of linguistic and syntactical innovation (what Lutz has called the achievement of a "vivid extremity of language") to be found in the fiction of writers like Gary Lutz and Diane Williams, and now pursued by Julie Reverb, allows for a greater compression of form because sentences and paragraphs are themselves more dynamic and provide the amplification we usually expect from fuller development of form and narrative. It will be interesting to see how Reverb further extends the possibilities of this orientation to the art of fiction in her future work.

**Elisabeth Sheffield**

To an extent, it's a little surprising that Elisabeth Sheffield's *Fort Da* (FC2) has not received more attention. It is, after all, in part a fairly sensational story about what we now call a "sexual predator," in this case a reversal of *Lolita* in which the "offender" is a female scientist who becomes obsessed with an adolescent boy. Although to be sure the story is told (by the woman) in an unorthodox way, the narrative is explicit enough, and the representation of motive and psychology seems true enough, it would seem the novel might have caused a little bit of controversy, although the very fact the narrative is related through unorthodox means that to some extent distance us from the events portrayed and mute the potentially scandalous elements suggests that Sheffield certainly did not seek to court controversy.

What Sheffield seems to be after is a truthful account of the narrator's affliction (if that's what it is) and of her manner of coping with it. The narrator straightforwardly acknowledges her desire for Aslan, the adolescent boy, and painstakingly chronicles the events of their meeting, their eventually consummated relationship, and her final efforts to track him down when she is separated from him. But she is not quite able to tell us this story from a conventional first-person point of view, as if she can't finally bring herself to associate these events and her part in them with the "normal" self she still wants to preserve, as if she just can't acknowledge her own agency. Thus she adopts a cumbrously "scientific" style emphasizing passive voice constructions. Addressing her "report" to her high school English teacher, Mrs. Wall, the narrator affirms

A true story that will faithfully present yours truly, without distortion or bias. To this end, a detached style has been adopted, one that will hopefully facilitate accurate reportage. The intent of this style is to step outside Rosemarie Ramee in order to more accurately observe her (and not, Strunk and White forbid, to annoy you with passive verb forms, which it is well remembered were a source of contention in high school). Yes, and maybe if the observations are presented with great care, with the greatest possible degree of honesty and precision, in the end empathy will be received.

Readers will have to decide for themselves whether to send RR (as she frequently hereafter identifies herself) "empathy," but her tortured attempts to remain objective, attempts she maintains throughout the narrative with gradually diminishing success, are really both the aesthetic and the emotional focus of the novel.

Aesthetically the style seems an apt analogue of the narrator's state of mind—she can tell the story, but only if she is in a sense able to withdraw her own participation and attempt to view the events with a kind of clinical detachment. Paradoxically, this forced detachment only makes the reader more aware of RR's obsession in the effort to cloak it, and her emotional turmoil becomes only more visible. This does have a discomfiting effect on the reader: there is a fascination to witnessing the machinations to which RR is driven in order to tell the tale, while we also recognize her strategy is in effect an attempt to minimize her offense. At the same time, it is not at all clear that Aslan resists RR's advances, or that he has been harmed by them, although of course the long-term harm cannot be predicted and we cannot finally trust that RR's account is anything but self-serving. She indicates that she is addressing her "confession" to Mrs. Wall because of the latter's reputation for leading an unconventional lifestyle, suggesting she does hope her audience might extend her some sympathy.

If *Fort Da* could be said to be "experimental" (FC2 is one of the most prominent—and oldest—American publishers of experimental fiction), it would have to be in this tonal discontinuity—how far can the reader extend his/her sympathy to such a character presenting herself in such a narrative voice relating a story about what today approaches being as taboo a subject as we have? While the "report" form is interesting enough, it is finally just another variation on the epistolary or diary forms first explored in novels like *Pamela* or *Robinson Crusoe* as the immediate context and justification for first-person narrative. The narrative itself is essentially linear, and though the narrator's language occasionally makes it necessary for the reader to check his/her bearings, it unfolds interrupted only by the by now rather familiar use of footnotes (although given the text's formal status as scientific "report," the footnotes don't seem out of place).

If RR, like Humbert Humbert, believes her desire for Aslan, like Humbert's for his "nymphet," is a genuine expression of love, she seems less comfortable than HH with this form of love. Although both *Fort Da* and *Lolita* could both be called comic novels, the comedy of *Lolita* is darker, arising from the audacity of HH's behavior. The humor of *Fort Da* arises from RR's own confusions and limited self-knowledge. This makes *Fort Da* a consistently compelling read—to call it entertaining would seem impertinent—but whether it has something to "say" about, for example, the nature of female desire vs male desire, or about the origins of sexual

behavior in psychological trauma (RR herself appears to believe she may be reacting to the early death of her brother) is perhaps for the reader to determine, depending on whether one considers it important that a novel treading on sensitive ground should redeem itself by making a "serious" point about the subject. In my opinion, the greatness of *Lolita* consists, in part, in its refusal to countenance communicating such a point. By raising "issues" related to pedophilia, *Fort Da* suggests it wants to "address" those issues and thus doesn't quite show the same kind of aesthetic daring we find in Nabokov's novel.

### **Rosalind Belben**

In a review of Rosalind Belben's impressive novel, *Our Horses in Egypt*, Stevie Davies calls it "a radical experiment in narrative." I think this is probably an overstatement, but there is certainly more going on in this novel, both structurally and stylistically, than might at first seem apparent.

Its twinning of narrative strands, one chronicling the experiences of a literal "war horse" conscripted into cavalry service during World War, the other narrating its owner's attempt to track it down in Egypt several years after the war, is not particularly innovative, although it is brought off effectively. And while in effect assigning the role of protagonist to a horse does allow Belben to avoid several worn-out devices still being trotted out (so to speak) in so many contemporary novels, the notion of a story centered on a non-human "character" is also by no means especially "radical." However, Belben's novel does present itself in ways most readers are likely to find distinctive, even if they are otherwise primarily engaged by the emotion-laden story Belben wants to tell.

Most noticeable is Belben's prose style, especially the pervasive, staccato-like dialogue featured in the sections of the novel dedicated to the quest by Griselda Romney, whose own husband was killed in the war, to find Philomena, the horse requisitioned at the beginning of the war who apparently survived it. Here's a representative sample:

"In the old days, we managed."

"These fellows you found. . ."

"They said they knew what they were about."

"You're so gullible."

"I shan't be again. I had to chloroform myself when Georgie was born."

"It didn't put you down."

"How could it, a whiff or two! I was glad of it."

"Poor Bunny."

"Oh, oh, don't!"

It isn't that this conversation is disconnected or incoherent that makes it seem so elliptical. It undoubtedly makes perfect sense to the speakers, and careful reading can certainly establish the context in which these remarks are being offered, even if such context does become clearer and the subject of conversation somewhat more comprehensible in a retrospective reading of this passage. (In this way, *Our Horses in Egypt* encourages a more attentive and recursive kind of reading, which need not be a burden and can ultimately enhance the reading experience.) The cumulative effect of this dialogue is a sense of thoroughgoing fidelity to the speech patterns of these characters as rooted in country, region, class, and time period. It is an actual example of "realism" unencumbered and applied with great rigor, and it is likely to unmoor the assumptions of those readers tied to a more conventionalized, less ascetic understanding of the role of "realistic" dialogue.

The second striking feature of Belben's novel is perhaps best illustrated in the section narrating Philomena's experiences in the Great War. While there is a narration of these events, it also comes shorn of rhetorical embellishment and narrative elaboration:

The Turkish machine-gunners played very freely across the Dorsets' front. Major Sandley wilted in the saddle. The dust raised was shot through with rosy rays of sun. Burgess sailed through the air, and was himself winged like a flapper. Riderless horses heaved themselves up, and thudded on with the rest. Philomena was so distracted (she had a curious view) she didn't hear the whump when, at four hundred yards, the files closed for impact and Corky was hit in the neck. She didn't pay any attention to his snort. But she saw the white of his eye. He was stubborn.

All of the narrative/expository passages in the novel proceed in this way, almost as if story were being built by accretion, storytelling replaced by listing: then this happened, then this, then this. Perhaps because *Our Horses in Egypt* is a historical novel, such a technique seems only the more appropriate, more faithful to the historical "record" (even when incidents and interactions have been imagined) as simply what happened, the essence of the historical past without the unnecessary intrusion of the storytelling gestures so many historical novelists seem to need.

Belben's listing strategy extends even to her sometimes idiosyncratic punctuation:

Nine yeomanry regiments had been withdrawn from Palestine. "The Bull" had lost, also, two infantry divisions; five and a half seige batteries; nine more British battalions and five machine-gun companies. He had been deprived of 60,00 battle-hardend troops. Infantry divisions arrived from Mesopotamia and India; and their transport drivers had to be trained. . . .

The semi-colons here seem to function not as a marker of sentence boundaries but as just one more way to extend the list of details associated with the withdrawal. *Our Horses in Egypt*, no matter how accurate its rendition of the British victory in Palestine, is finally still a rendition, its narrative method as much artifice as any other, but its triumph is perhaps in the way it skillfully employs its artifice while simultaneously appearing to conceal it. History seems to lie before us, however much it has been conjured up by a particular kind of verbal manipulation.

So skillful is this manipulation that, despite the deliberate poverty of means in the novel's construction, *Our Horses in Egypt* still tells an affecting story, both in the half concerning Griselda's finally hopeless effort to bring Philomena back alive and in that focusing on the Palestine campaign. And what could have been a smarmy resolution in which Griselda finally does find Philomena and spirits her back to England to live out her days in tranquility becomes instead a bitterly appropriate portrayal of a Philomena brought to ruin through overwork, beyond rescue and suitable only to be euthanized in a token act of pity. This is a novel that risks sentimentality at every stage in its development but that avoids it through unfaltering artistry.

### **Sara Greenslit**

On the one hand, it is easy enough to see how Sara Greenslit's *The Blue of Her Body* (Starcherone Books) could be called a "poet's novel." It makes no effort to "tell a story" in the

ponderous, pedestrian mode too often adopted by novelists who come to fiction through an interest in narrative (as exemplified either in other fiction they've read or in movies) rather than engaging with language and its possibilities for creating verbal art or exploring fresh ways of representing experience. There's no facile psychologizing of characters portrayed as "real people," no faux-dramatic plot points, no perfunctorily inserted dialogue straining to be "believable." No exposition, rising and falling action, or contrived resolution of the artificially induced "conflict." Instead, *The Blue of Her Body* is an artfully arranged construction of words, a novel that asks the reader to infer the "story" between the lines of its brief prose passages.

On the other hand, one would not call this novel "poetic" because it indulges in conventional figurative phrasing, lunges after arresting tropes, offers up an ostentatious display of "fine writing." Greenslit's prose is more matter-of-fact, more objectively descriptive:

Her rented house on the edge of town is small, chipped paint, all her own. She likes the windows, large and filled with trees. The morning light on the wood floor reminds her of her mother's caramel. The dog clatters through the house, pet hair collects in the corners. She no longer needs a vacuum. The broom is easier.

She has chosen birds over the soft other.

A week before her new job at the aviary starts, boxes are left stacked in the living room. She is afraid to put everything away. She fears the open space. She fears the silence she sought, the echoes. She had wanted these things, but now they loom and hover.

She brought only what was hers. But everything reminds her of Kate.

One chapter consists entirely of mostly one-sentence "paragraphs":

Whenever it was summer, I fell into a trance watching leaves on windy days

The sky was cloudless and blue like the spaces inside loved ones

Peregrine hacking box, nestling feather fuss down, eyes and beaks

Mother's summer garden: Asiatic lilies, red as a South American carnival,  
coneflowers about to unfold

When I was in love, I couldn't imagine any hands but yours. I smelled you while I worked, I saw you in our bed.

When I left, you wouldn't look me in the eye.

I was fool, fool to my mood.

I ate my pills day after day, unable to see.

One could say that the novel unfolds in lines and stanzas, rather than sequential prose paragraphs that disappear in the narrative flow they are meant to serve, although this does not so much make it a kind of prose poem as provoke us into considering the sometimes fine line between prose and verse, fiction and poetry. Why can't a novel proceed via evocative, carefully crafted sentences rather than routine, narrative-bearing paragraphs? At what point does the novelist leave to the poet the care and tending of language at its most fundamental level, the habitation of the word, the phrase, the sentence?

Much of what *The Blue of Her Body* is "about" is expressed in the first-quoted passage above: "She has chosen birds over the soft other." The novel's unnamed narrator has broken up with her lover in the city and moved into the country to work at an aviary. In her isolation, she considers her own history of depression, broods on her relationship with her mother (also a depressive) and her failed relationship with Kate, and takes the opportunity to further cultivate her love of animals. The novel in effect chronicles the narrator's convalescence, concluding with a variation on Emily Dickinson: "Hope is a damaged bird. She heals and then stays. . . ."

The narrator's dilemma and her attempt to work through it, however, are presented almost entirely through inference and suggestion. The story is pure backstory. In addition to the brief expository passages and the declarative sentences (sometimes stated in the third-person, sometimes in first-person), there are fragmentary accounts of the activity in the aviary, haiku-like descriptions of animals and of nature in general, and cumulative bits of information about the various efforts to treat the narrator's depression. While Greenslit thus avoids converting the narrator's circumstances into narrative melodrama, ultimately her novel does present a coherent and convincing, if oblique, portrait of its protagonist's struggle to gather her life into some semblance of order and purpose.

I believe that the future of prose fiction will only lead it closer to a kind of rapprochement with poetry, where the novel began as a splintering-off of narrative from the storytelling mode of epic poetry (just as drama appropriated the "dramatic" in dramatic poetry). Now that film and television (as well as what is called "creative nonfiction") have in turn taken over the storytelling function, at least for the mass audience, fiction's continued relevance, aside from those novels seemingly written with the film adaptation in mind, will perhaps require that it return to its origins in the poet's attention to language per se. Experimental fiction almost always points us in this direction, as challenges to the hegemony of conventional storytelling usually entail a reinvigoration of the resources of language, highlighting the capacity of prose fiction to do something else. *The Blue of Her Body* is an admirable addition to this effort.

## **GOING DEEP**

### **Helen DeWitt**

In her review of the novel. Helen McClory makes a curious criticism of Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (2011): "What it lacks is interiority. The narration, because it is so slick and over-worked, has the feel of a voice-over; it's all surface, even when we are ostensibly presented with access to the minds of the characters. This creates a sensation of hollowness. . . ." (*Review 31*)

The total misperception here of DeWitt's purpose in *Lightning Rods* is extraordinary. As almost all other reviewers of this novel observed, it is most certainly a novel of "interiority," although it is a special kind of interiority that deliberately uses the contents of consciousness—more importantly, the forms of expression those contents assume—to create a pervasively "surface" effect. If it seems "slick and overworked," that's because the modes of thinking the novel travesties are themselves so formulaic and riven with cliché. "A sensation of hollowness" is precisely the effect *Lightning Rods* is designed to create.

The plot of *Lightning Rods* is perhaps by now well-known, as the novel received numerous reviews that prominently emphasized its outrageous premise. A failed vacuum cleaner salesman, Joe, is inspired by his own sexual fantasies to begin marketing a new service designed to help alleviate sexual harassment in the workplace: a contraption installed in an office bathroom that allows testosterone-addled men to have anonymous sex with women (the lightning

rods) whose bottom halves are exposed rearward and then withdrawn back through the bathroom wall. The service proves to be quite successful, for the companies whose workplaces become less litigious, for the men whose needs are fulfilled and thus become more efficient and cooperative workers, and for the women, who are handsomely rewarded financially and in some cases use the job to work themselves up the "corporate ladder." (One of the lightning rods eventually becomes a Supreme Court lawyer.)

Joe's diligence and sincerity are reflected in the manner of the book's narration, nominally in the form of "free indirect" discourse, the stylistic/narrative mode developed precisely to plumb a character's "interiority." But while the language with which the story is told surely does capture the way Joe both perceives the world and explains it to himself, it is indeed shallow and hackneyed, permeated by the external languages of self-help and commerce:

Now if you're selling encyclopedias it's obvious you're selling people the idea that they can be what they want to be. But even if you're selling vacuum cleaners you're selling people the way they could be--they could be people who will clean their stairs and the furniture and curtains using appropriate attachments, instead of borrowing a vacuum cleaner for Thanksgiving and Christmas from their next-door neighbors. You're selling the chance to fix something that's wrong. What you're selling, basically, is the idea that there's nothing wrong with the customer; maybe they don't know as much as they should, or maybe they happen to live in a dirty house, but that's because they don't have the one thing lacking to put it right.

The reader could turn to practically any page in *Lightning Rods* and find a passage like this. Clearly DeWitt wants not just to emphasize Joe's subjectivity, but to suggest that this very subjectivity has been thoroughly determined by the all-pervasive discourses, and the underlying assumptions, of American-style capitalism and its accompanying modes of therapeutic encouragement. No matter how "deep" we plumb into Joe's "interiority," we're only going to find more such platitudinous language and bromidic concepts, since in effect they have replaced any genuine interiority, substituted for any genuine thinking, beyond the need to apply the concepts most effectively. As Edmond Caldwell observes in his review of the novel, "It is less like Joe 'uses' this language. . .and more like this language thinks him" (*Chicago Review*)--although it

might be even more accurate to say there is no thinking at all going on, only the pre-formulated thinking represented by the recycling of familiar expressions.

Caldwell also maintains that the novel is a satire of its own ostensible genre, the novel of "psychological realism," which "stands revealed as a patchwork of readymade materials--cliches and slogans, the hoariest sententia and newly-minted banalities." If all such novels are "no less a howling absurdity than *Lightning Rods*, the difference is that one of them knows itself as such." While I would not deny the accuracy of this reading, I don't think the self-satirical impulse fully accounts for the effects DeWitt manages to achieve in nevertheless exploiting the assumptions of psychological realism. She employs its "cliches and slogans" in a way that, at the same time they are revealed to be such, transcends the "banalities" of this mode of narration to tell a story that is far from banal, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of John Barth's notion of a "literature of exhaustion" that takes the very "used-upness" of a literary practice and creates something new. As much as it shows psychological realism to be "a patchwork of readymade materials," the novel also shows that human consciousness itself (at least of the "ordinary" variety) might be a hodgepodge of such materials. There's no going "deep," only going sideways into more culturally determined fragments of predigested language.

"Surface" and "interiority" are interchangeable, versions of each other. The characters' motives in *Lightning Rods* are not hidden (to themselves or to us) but quite transparent, although those motives are encapsulated in the shallowest, most insipid kind of interior discourse. The most powerful human motive, sex, is, of course, thoroughly externalized, subjected to the same trivialization and commodification by which American culture reduces all human activity to commerce. (It isn't prostitution if it makes good business sense.) Much of the humor in *Lightning Rods* comes from the way in which the characters readily adapt to circumstances that might otherwise provoke feelings of shame and degradation, how easily the sexual drive comes to be regarded as something that merely requires the right kind of management.

What makes this novel more than simply satirical (whether of the American commercial imperative or the novel of psychological realism) is that the ostensible target, our protagonist Joe, in whose "interiority" we have been placed and whose idea it is to channel the sexual drive in his commercialized service, is finally not a character deserving only of our laughter. Above

all, Joe is utterly sincere in his belief that his service will have beneficial effects, that in offering it he is doing good. He shows concern for his employees, and as a sideline to the main business of providing lightning rods, he also devises an adjustable toilet to make public restrooms easier on short and/or obese people. His sincerity and good intentions make it difficult to regard Joe as a purely risible figure; he winds up being a rather sympathetic character who at worst has succumbed to the irresistible influence of cultural forces outside his control.

Readers of DeWitt's first novel, *The Last Samurai*, might at first find *Lightning Rods* a radically different kind of work, almost as if not written by the same writer. *Samurai* is a sprawling novel that at times courts formlessness, while *Lightning Rods* is a compact, sharply focused work exhibiting a unified narrative perspective that contrasts with the bifurcated perspective of the previous novel. Ultimately *The Last Samurai* could be called a novel about a search for identity, while the characters in *Lightning Rods* seem quite confident in their identities, even if those identities are ultimately culturally constructed. To a degree, however, both books are about the use and abuse of language. *The Last Samurai* highlights the possibilities of language in its story of the budding genius Ludo and his facility in many languages and ability to relate them to each other, something that DeWitt also does in the novel as a whole. *Lightning Rods* illustrates our more common relationship with language, whereby we allow our thinking to be determined by language in its most ossified, restrictive forms. If *The Last Samurai* implies the yet untapped potential of language when viewed cross-culturally, *Lightning Rods* reveals how any language can become so burdened with the conceptual debris scattered by one's culture as to become hazardous to all thought.

### **Eimear McBride**

Contemporary fiction has so thoroughly returned to observing convention in prose style and storytelling that a novel imitating less conventional strategies used by writers a hundred years ago is hailed as “radical.” This is the only explanation I can understand for the rapturous reception accorded Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* when it was published in Ireland and the U.K. In many ways this is a perfectly good novel that to a degree does challenge complacent reading habits, but it hardly seems necessary in order to acknowledge its achievement to declare it a daring experiment (“experimental” was a word used frequently by reviewers), nor to assert it is “a book that is not like any other,” as one reviewer put it. Such

hyperbole does the book a disservice, setting up exalted expectations it can't meet and ultimately obscuring the very influences the reader should be familiar with to genuinely appreciate what McBride has attempted.

To judge by the kind of fiction that receives serious attention in the most prominent review spaces, it would seem that the era in contemporary fiction in which formally and stylistically adventurous writers genuinely challenged the preeminence of social and psychological realism not only has passed, but that it was some kind of aberration with little lasting influence, as writers get back to “normal” fiction. Although a few surviving writers associated with this era such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo still receive considerable attention, this comes at a time when arguably their work has itself become more conventional, even repetitive, and thus easier to accommodate to a change in critical taste that otherwise can regard their earlier work as “classic” postmodernism belonging safely to the past. Younger writers who might be considered experimental or innovative — that is, truly experimental, not simply retooling previous innovative strategies to make them more reader-friendly — are routinely ignored in mainstream book reviews except when their books might have cautionary value as freakish exercises of a kind real writers would do best to avoid.

Certainly upon beginning *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, readers will not find the usual sort of expository prose recent literary fiction has conditioned us to expect. However, only readers unfamiliar with the work of Joyce, Woolf, or Proust could conclude that these initial pages introduce an unprecedented, revelatory technique:

Walking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want, she says. I want to see my son. Smell of dettol through her skin. Mops diamond floor tiles all as strong. All the burn your eyes out if you had some. Her heart going pat. Going dum dum dum.

This is, of course, a variant of the “stream-of-consciousness” strategy as practiced by such writers as Joyce and Dorothy Richardson, itself the most radical development of the modernist pursuit of psychological realism. The move toward probing interior states found in the fiction of Woolf or Henry James is what initially makes modernist fiction seem “difficult,” although later versions of modernism did go beyond what is now called “free indirect discourse” in exploring alternatives to conventional storytelling.

Storytelling in *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is done entirely through the use of the stream-of-consciousness method,, as we are plunged “deep” into the mind of its protagonist, who is depicted from her childhood to college, a period bracketed by the trauma of her brother’s early brain cancer and the trauma of its return and his subsequent death. In between, the protagonist undergoes other traumas, most horribly sexual abuse by her uncle. While the protagonist’s experiences are not related to us in a typically dramatic way through conventional prose, nevertheless the novel’s unorthodox narrative strategy gets the story told rather efficiently, as the reader becomes accustomed soon enough to the psychological shorthand that is the essence of stream-of-consciousness style.

That McBride skillfully uses this style to relate her disturbing but ultimately somewhat familiar story of the maturation and sexual experiences of a young girl, albeit in this case inflected by the depiction of familial abuse, is the best measure of the novel’s success, but this hardly makes McBride’s use of the style in the first place an act of originality or daring. Perhaps we can say she uses it skillfully enough that it produces effects that would not have been possible with a more conventional style of narration, including a more conventional mode of free indirect discourse. Perhaps we can say that the use of stream-of-consciousness in this novel does create a kind of intimacy with the young protagonist, whose reactions to her often harrowing experiences are recorded with a particularly affecting immediacy. In this way, it is a novel whose “content” can be realized only through this particular narrative strategy, and the kind of language the strategy requires. But does it really diminish the novel’s actual accomplishment to characterize it as an adroit adaptation of an already existing technique to create an aesthetically satisfying work of fiction rather than exaggerate or mislead by describing it as an innovation?

If the prose style we encounter in *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is initially resistant to our usual expectations, it acquires its own kind of clarity in advancing the narrative:

The beginning of teens us. Thirteen me fifteen sixteen you. Wave and wave of it hormone over. Like hot flush cold splash down my neck. Spilt with new thoughts, troublesome that is and things that always must be said. Spill it out. Spill it down.

Where’s that father? Mine? Who belonged to was part of me? I think of. Where is he? Imagination of fathers sitting by me on the bed. Stroking my hair you’re my girl, belong

to me pet. I have heard of seen those things somewhere on the telly. And I say will you ever tell me what he said about daughters before I was born?

The purpose of these paragraphs in marking the passage of time is fully clear, as is the description of the travails of adolescence. If “hot flush cold splash” seems motivated more for the effect of verbal modulation (hot/cold, flush/splash) than for its accurate rendering of a young girl’s consciousness, nonetheless the effect of this passage is to create an alternative cadence that carries the reader along as effectively as ordinary expository prose, and works to build an empathy with the character that goes beyond either straightforward 3rd- or 1st-person narration in its evocation of her longing for her absent father. Only a reader who refuses to consider alternatives at all to the usual expectations could continue to find McBride’s approach difficult or confusing.

The “you” addressed by the girl throughout the novel is her brother, which on the one hand brings additional unity to the narrative mode McBride has chosen, but also introduces a complicating factor in considering the conceptual integrity of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*. The suggestion that she is in some sense talking to her dead brother raises the possibility that what often seems like an extemporaneous, fragmentary account of the girl’s immediate experience is actually her own retrospective narration of her past, an act of memory. But if she is indeed recalling her past, then the stream-of-consciousness effect is muted, if not negated altogether. What we have instead is a transmogrified 1st-person narrative that seems to mimic the stream-of-consciousness technique, but whose rationale remains unclear. It is implausible that she would be in the process of remembering her entire life story, and even if she were, would she really be doing so in this kind of broken discourse, which is ultimately just as artificial, just as “literary,” as any other stylistic device? From this perspective, the narrative is not related through stream-of-consciousness at all but directly by the protagonist, in a fashion that finally could seem improbably contrived.

No doubt most readers will simply accept McBride’s narrative strategy as giving us access to the narrator/protagonist’s way of internally processing events, even if that strategy is logically incoherent. Indeed, if *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* ultimately provides a compelling reading experience and the impression of authenticity in its portrayal of its main character’s difficult young life, do the technical features of its storytelling really even matter? Perhaps not,

but neither should a novel that simply recasts what was at one time a truly radical departure from the literary norm as a variation on a familiar practice be regarded as an artistic breakthrough. This is an adept enough novel on its own terms that it shouldn't be represented in other, unsuitable terms that distort both the novel and the literary history to which it properly belongs.

## COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

### Erin Pringle

A debut work that is explicitly identified as experimental--or in this case "unique and innovative," as the book's back cover has it--seems a useful opportunity to consider what "experimental" appears to signify to young writers aspiring to produce fiction worthy of that designation. Erin Pringle's story collection *The Floating Order* (Two Ravens Press) offers such an opportunity, and while there may be questions about the accuracy of calling it experimental, it is nevertheless an impressive enough set of stories. It is certainly not an ordinary first work of "literary fiction" and for that reason alone commends itself to readers looking for more than the pallid and derivative exercises in convention most such fiction has to offer.

If an immediately observable characteristic of "experimental fiction" is an implicit questioning of the centrality of "story," with its attendant requirements of "exposition," "narrative arc," "backstory," etc., then *The Floating Order* initially meets this expectation. A few of the stories do ultimately include moments of action--even rather extreme action--but most of them either proceed in the absence of a chartable narrative line or in effect take place in a discursive zone in which the important events have already happened, the protagonist, frequently the narrator and frequently a child, continuing on while unavoidably returning to these events in a fragmentary and oblique way. The reader is asked to suspend final comprehension of the nature and the consequences of these events, but the gradual realization of their full import has a quietly powerful effect.

The collection's first, and title, story is a good example of this approach. Narrated by a woman who has, we ultimately determine, drowned her own children (a situation no doubt inspired by the Andrea Yates case), the "story" unfolds as a kind of spontaneous emanation of the narrator's disturbed mind, circling around the deed but not quite confronting it, freely shifting from past to present, often speaking of the dead children as if they were still alive. The story

doesn't so much plumb the depths of the character's insanity as it spills that insanity onto the page through the narrator's free associations of memory--however dissociated--and detail. Ultimately the jumbled, distorted pieces of the story cohere into an affecting account of the narrator's troubles, and the impact is only heightened by the incremental way in which the horror of her experience is revealed.

"The Floating Order" also exemplifies the prevailing prose style of the stories in this book, a style that reflects a certain ingenuousness in the characters' perspective expressed in unadorned language:

I asked the policeman if he'd like some juice, as we were out of milk. He was polite. I explained that my babies are saved. He held my hand and opened the car door for me. Natalie sat in the passenger seat and played with the radio dials. I told her to stop it. The policeman asked who I was talking to. I wouldn't explain. My husband has such high hopes.

Many of the stories are narrated by a child, for whom this sort of low-affect discourse seems well-suited in its guilelessness, but it also has an almost hypnotic effect when applied to damaged adult characters like this one. The occasional shocks it delivers as revelatory images and bits of information punctuate the narrator's recitation effectively substitute for straightforward plot progression.

The author wisely chose to present what is perhaps the volume's best story first, but the next several stories are also quite good, reinforcing the themes and the narrative strategy introduced in "The Floating Order." "Cats and Dogs" relates the predicament of two abandoned children (the father is in prison), the nature of that predicament revealed in the same piecemeal fashion; in "Looker," a father struggles to convey to his daughter what her now dead mother was like as a young woman, although again we have to infer she is dead through indirect references ("Your mother shouldn't have smoked"); "Losing, I Think" fitfully unfolds a story of a mother raising a child without the assistance of a mostly elusive father; in "Sanctuary," a mover while transporting a piano from a church finds the corpse of a young girl inside it.

These stories establish an atmosphere of menace and foreboding that permeates the book and that the style and structure introduced in the first few stories evoke especially well. Children

are portrayed as particularly vulnerable to the hazards of the adult world, and thus most of the stories in *The Floating Order* feature children, either as narrators or important characters, attempting to cope with the consequences of human weakness, or in some cases with what seems the random drift of existence. The second half of the book is not as effective as the first, featuring some stories that are a little too sensational ("Why Jimmy?"), too melodramatic ("Drift") or tug a little too much at the heartstrings ("And Yet"), but the best stories show a young writer seeking to reveal uncomfortable truths and challenge complacent reading habits.

Still "experimental" arguably is not the appropriate term to use in characterizing Erin Pringle's fiction as represented in *The Floating Order*. Ultimately the stories work to create an overarching depiction of the lives of children in present-day America, and, the honesty of the depiction notwithstanding, this is a project all too familiar in first books (and sometimes later ones as well) by American writers. To the extent that the book does take risks in style and form, it does so in order to first of all advance this project, the "content" elevated above formal experiment. This is not necessarily a flaw in the book, although in general the effort to "capture" childhood in fiction has become rather hackneyed, and, while *The Floating Order* surpasses most other efforts in this sub-genre of literary fiction, it tacks hard enough in the direction of "saying something" about childhood in America in purely sociological terms that whatever is "experimental" in the book finally seems secondary to this larger purpose of locating the stories within the sub-genre, however "dark" they may be.

In my view, truly experimental or innovative or adventurous fiction attempts to expand the possibilities of fiction as a literary form and does so for the sake of the form itself, not to amplify social or cultural criticism or to intervene in philosophical debates (although these things might be an indirect effect, as is often the case in all worthwhile fiction). To question whether *The Floating Order* really signals that Erin Pringle will consistently produce such aesthetically challenging fiction, however, is not at all to diminish its achievement or deny its satisfactions.

### **Siri Hustvedt**

In his review of Siri Hustvedt's 2008 novel, *The Sorrows of an American*, Ron Charles calls it "a radically postmodern novel." This is a rather astonishing claim. Although this novel could be described as somewhat fragmented, containing numerous flashbacks and some interpolated documents, primarily a journal kept by the narrator's deceased father, it could hardly

be called formally adventurous at all, much less “radically” so. It is a mostly conventional first-person narrative, even if Hustvedt does exploit the narrator’s occupation as a psychoanalyst, as well as the general intellectual milieu he inhabits, to evoke various philosophical and scientific “ideas.” Perhaps it is this impression of intellectual density that leads Charles to consider *The Sorrows of an American* “postmodern,” but this seems an odd criterion for identifying the postmodern, since the “novel of ideas” surely antedates postmodernism. The fiction of Dostoevsky or Saul Bellow is probably even more intellectually dense than Hustvedt’s novel, but of course nobody thinks to call these writers postmodern.

Hustvedt’s *The Blazing World* is likewise full of ideas, in this case, the ideas of Harriet “Harry” Burden, the novel’s artist protagonist. Readers familiar with Hustvedt’s work will thus find familiar in *The Blazing World* not only the references to Husserl or Kierkegaard but also the focus on art and the creation of art, as this is the focus as well of Hustvedt’s most well-known novel, *What I Loved* (2002). *What I Loved* featured a male conceptual artist whose idiosyncratic work ultimately finds an audience, but this novel is also a study in friendship, family dynamics, and dysfunction, narrated by the artist’s best friend, whose own story receives equal emphasis. By contrast, *The Blazing World*, although it includes a plethora of peripheral characters, in themselves of varying interest, uses these characters to provide perspective on Harry Burden, whose status as a female artist is the novel’s sole focus.

Like Bill Wechsler in *What I Loved* (Wechsler’s name is invoked in *The Blazing World* as an influence on Harry’s work), Harry Burden is also a conceptual artist, but unlike Wechsler Harry was never able to sustain herself as an artist, instead being known primarily as an art collector and the wife of a prominent art critic. Harry believes that the neglect of her work as an artist can be attributed to her gender, to the perception of her as the art critic’s wife, the hostess at his parties. After her husband’s death, Harry conspires with three men, one a well-known artist in his own right, to produce three separate exhibitions of her work, presented under their names. The shows are successful, seeming to confirm Harry’s notion that literally these works are being perceived differently when assumed to be created by male artists than they would be if exhibited with her name attached.

At the time of her own death, then, Harriet Burden had begun to get some of the attention she so clearly desired, although as we are introduced to the “case” of Harriet Burden, we are also

told that her hoax is still somewhat controversial, the authenticity of the work still in some dispute. The novel we are reading, we also discover immediately, is in fact a kind of memorial volume dedicated to Harriet Burden and the scandal she created, a collection of interviews, reminiscences, and critical considerations, as well as selections from several different notebooks kept by Harry herself. *The Blazing World* is thus manifestly more adventurous formally than *The Sorrows of an American* (than *What I Loved as well*), but of course as a form of epistolary fiction such an approach is hardly brand new, and could not be cited in support of a claim that this novel shows Siri Hustvedt to be a radically postmodern writer.

Harry's notebooks feature her reflections on what she is up to, the recorded interviews with family, friends, and co-conspirators adding perspective on her behavior and to some extent a response to the work Harry produced from the motives and ideas revealed in the notebooks. The animating assumption Harry believes her art confirms—that aesthetic perception is never pure, is always colored by acquired preconceptions and implicit biases—is provocative enough, but again it can't really be called an original insight, and it doesn't become more exceptional or more interesting when it is illustrated not simply through one example by which Harry demonstrated her work was misperceived and undervalued, dismissed when directly attributed to her but extolled when accompanied by a male artist's name, but three separate episodes related in considerable detail and reiterated in the surrounding commentary. One finishes this novel convinced that Harriet Burden certainly has a point in contending that women's art is literally not seen on its own terms, but having long conceded that point at the price of diminished interest in the details of the story making it.

*The Blazing World* seems very much a novel with something to “say,” not just generally about human motives and behavior but very specifically about art and artists, and about “gendered” perception. The “ideas” the novel invokes, ideas drawn from neuroscience and philosophy, are thus ideas that Harry directly explicates and are offered to us as the inspiration for Harry's practice. While this linking of art and idea may be an accurate enough reflection of the close relationship that does indeed obtain between art and idea in contemporary conceptual art—where art has arguably become subordinate to idea—it doesn't serve well as material for the art of fiction. If conceptual art often reduces the experience of art to the contemplation of the idea that the art serves to bring into focus, *The Blazing World* settles for the ideas leading to the

ideas leading to the art whose existence must remain imaginary. This problem is not solved by the literal, extended descriptions of the works Harry Burden exhibits, which are mostly colorless and functional, assuming, presumably, we will find these works inherently compelling because they are unusual and “quirky” (an assumption that plagues *What I Loved* even more severely). The *Blazing World* is “about” art in the least interesting way a work of fiction can be “about” something: as direct communication, as exposition of the subject’s “content.” What if in *A Farewell to Arms* Hemingway had given us a detailed analysis of the Battle of Caporetto, complete with reflections on its role in determining the outcome of World War I, instead of a story about a doomed romance? Surely this is not what we want from a novel “about” war.

The novel is not without its more admirable and more artfully executed features. Harriet Burden is by no means a one-dimensional figure without interest aside from her role in illustrating the status of women artists. She is obviously thoughtful and determined, but can also be exasperating and irascible, so that the discussions of Harriet that testify to all of these qualities don’t seem inconsistent. She can be clear-eyed and calculating, but also openly emotional, vulnerable to disappointment. If *The Blazing World* is rescued from its own didacticism, it would be because the reader finds Harry Burden more interesting than the art world issues with which she is preoccupied. (More interesting than the art world itself as portrayed in the novel.) For this reason, the multiple perspectives from which we approach Harry turns out to be an effective strategy, since her intensity might be more difficult to take if she were in effect the narrator of her own story.

Still, however fortuitous the novel’s formal structure is in reinforcing its strongest feature, ultimately this structure has been employed primarily because it is the most convenient way to organize a novel that is essentially a consideration of a topic. Had that topic more consistently been the existential and psychological travails of a woman in Harry Burden’s personal and professional circumstances, rather than the communication of her aesthetic philosophy, *The Blazing World* would be a better book.

## **FORMAL DISRUPTIONS**

### **Magdalena Tulli**

This is how Polish writer Magdalena Tulli's novel, *Flaw* (Archipelago Books), begins:

First will come the costumes. The tailor will supply them all wholesale. He'll select the designs off-handedly and, with a few snips of the shears, will summon to life a predictable repertoire of gestures. See—scraps of fabric and thread in a circle of light, while all around is darkness. Out of the turmoil will emerge a fold of cloth, the germ of a tuck fastened with a pin. The tuck will create everything else. If it's sufficiently deep, it will call into existence a glittering watch chain on a protruding belly, labored breathing, and a bald head bedewed with perspiration. One thing leads to another.

One thing leads to another, not just in the tailor's work but in the work of fiction before us, the creation of which is being laid out much as the tailor lays out the cloth to cut. The narrative begins with the tailor, who is needed for that "predictable repertoire of gestures" his actions call forth, the marks of "character" to be found in the costumes worn. Additional items--a maid's dress, a notary's collar, a student's jacket, a general's uniform--are made, all for the "characters" who will later wear them as they play their roles in the story just beginning.

Soon the setting for this story, a city square, is introduced:

The place may look like some quiet neighborhood of a large city, where squares of this sort are encountered at every step amid the dense network of streets. But the vast whole to which this fragment belongs is not accessible. On each of the several streets connecting to the square, the pavement comes to an end just beyond the corner. Anyone who unduly trusts the solid look of the basalt cobbles and wishes to go elsewhere will immediately be mired in sandy excavations, amid the blank walls of apartment buildings, under windows drawn in chalk directly onto the plaster. Distant steeples and indistinct towers rise over the roofs and suggest the dimensions of the entirety of which this square is supposedly a part. Yet the whole itself must remain conjecture, as imponderable as accomplished facts or as forecasts of the future. Maintaining its substance and its walls and rooftops multiplied in real space would be impossible for me, and also unnecessary. In the meantime, the streetcar is already moving on its track. This will be the zero-line streetcar, the only line there is, and more than sufficient for the needs of a single square. Let the shape of the zero, unhurriedly described, accentuate the extraordinary qualities of

the circle, a figure perfectly enclosed, whose whole is encompassed by a continuous line without losing a thing.

On the one hand, it is relatively easy to evoke a sense of "realism." All that is needed is a flower bed filled with "small yellow blooms," some "ornamental railings on the balconies and lace curtains in the windows," the "basalt cobbles." On the other, to extend this realism to the "vast whole" beyond the square and its provisional, self-enclosed existence is not worth the trouble, is impossible to maintain and of little value if the "world" as represented in a city square is as much world as the novelist needs to portray it in fiction. Like the zero-line streetcar, this aesthetic world can be "perfectly enclosed. . .encompassed by a continuous line without losing a thing."

Soon enough, the characters themselves start making their appearances, characters such as the local policeman:

The policeman moves on as the streetcar continues its route around the square.  
How would that rather faded uniform sit on me? Maybe it would pinch under the arms? If I am the policeman, there was a time when I risked my neck in the trenches for the emblem that appears on my cap.

"I" is the narrative voice whose invocation of place and character we are witnessing as he/she/it brings the novel we are reading to "life." It should not be associated directly with the author but is instead a kind of character the author has created, a "novelist" whose job it is to bring together all of the elements that are needed to set the narrative into motion and keep it functioning. Sometimes this narrative voice conveys the story—or what is ultimately the story of the story—as a third-person narrator, outside all of the other characters and focusing on them one by one, but at times reconsiders the point of view and offers fragments related in the first person: "If I am the policeman. . ."; "If I am the notary's maid, on the second floor of the apartment building at number seven I take the vegetables out the basket. . ."; "If I am the notary, I shave with caution, and my hand never trembles. Before my eyes I can still see the blood I just wiped off the mirror, a reminder that my body is tired and all set to lower its tone." At times it is as if the narrator is leaving it up to us to decide whether we prefer the "inside" or the "outside" perspective, or, perhaps, whether in the end such a distinction is very meaningful.

*Flaw* relates what happens on this square over the course of a single day. And it is an eventful day. Most dramatically, a large group of "refugees" emerges from the streetcar and crowds into the square, to the extreme consternation of the local residents. Eventually the refugees are confined en masse in a cellar, but at the end of the day it is discovered that they have disappeared. An Army general is disconcerted by this turn of events, reflecting that "What he ordered to be locked up should have remained so, period. . . The absence of the crowd is nothing but a special form of presence, and what has changed is in essence of secondary importance. Since the refugees are no longer here, they must be somewhere else, that much is obvious." The refugees seem to be a consequence of a coup that has taken place somewhere amid the "sandy excavations" outside the square but that we know about only through the rumors circulating through the square and that may have been connected to a loud explosion heard earlier in the day.

The novel ends with a reverie about what may have happened to the refugees if they had managed to make it to "America." The narrator concludes:

Happy endings are never happier than is possible. It might seem that, like a springtime thaw, they bring the promise of a new beginning, but the truth is otherwise. They merely lay bare the rotting matter of dashed hopes. Fortunate turns of events bring no relief, consumed as they are by the mold of unintentionally ironic meanings, and shot through with the musty despair of past seasons. And it is from them, these endings which end nothing, that new stories will grow.

One senses that the next day on this (presumably) East European square would unfold much like the day the novel has related, if not in detail then certainly in essence. That the novel has managed to convey this essence is perhaps a mark of its "success," but *Flaw* also seems to suggest that representing a bare essence of human existence is the best that fiction can do. By dramatizing the seat-of-the-pants process by which fiction is composed, highlighting the conventional signals of "setting" or "character" that guide our reading of fiction, disclosing the extent to which fiction is the active struggle to incorporate reality within an aesthetic scheme, not a completed account of reality, *Flaw* exposes the "flaw" in thinking that fiction can be a seamless representation of the real. It is artifice all the way down, and it does no justice, either to fiction or to the reality it seeks to encompass, to deny that fact.

Ultimately the true success of *Flaw* is its dynamic—I would even say entertaining—performance of this internal drama about the act of fiction-making.

Because of the praiseworthy efforts of Archipelago Books, with the publication of *In Red*, we now have available translations of all four novels Tulli has written to date. Considering the general lack of attention given to translations by major American publishers, such a happy circumstance provides an opportunity to assess the work of this writer to an extent unfortunately not possible for too many translated writers, who are generally represented in English by at best an incomplete selection that may or may not include their most important work, or through which it is difficult to make a fully informed judgment of the important work because of the absence of needed context (context that could be provided if more publishers included with a translated book a preface or critical introduction, presumably by a scholar or critic familiar with the author's work and/or with that author's national literature). Many writers are arguably subject to a distorted perspective due to the vagaries of translation, resulting no doubt in both the over- and the under-estimation of individual books in what is essentially a state of enforced ignorance for critics and reviewers.

Thus if English language readers had only Tulli's first novel, *Dreams and Stones*, we might conclude her work is some hybrid of fiction and philosophical reflection, this novel a kind of poetic meditation in prose on the origins and development of a city. The city itself is really the novel's only character, its various stages of growth the only plot. If we were further able to read *Moving Targets*, we might assume Tulli is a radical metafictionist, as it takes the motif of creation and makes it into a tale of specifically literary creation, following the efforts of an ineffectual narrator to invoke his characters and get his story started. This novel would seem to mark Tulli as a "postmodern" writer focused on the implications of storytelling itself. Adding to the mix *Flaw* (chronologically her most recent book), however, it would seem that Tulli's novels can also be "about" something other than themselves. *Flaw* does not abandon the self-reflexive depiction of the dynamics of storytelling and the process of creation; rather it incorporates this concern in a portrayal of a fully made city with characters that do come to life, albeit more as a collective than as individual figures, and a story whose drama goes beyond (or is in addition to) the drama of narrative construction.

*In Red* is Tulli's most conventional novel—which is not to say it could finally be described as a conventional work of fiction. Still, to the extent it does offer individuated characters, some degree of plot “movement,” and a strongly delineated setting, readers hesitant to commit to one of the novels that seems formidably experimental might find *In Red* a more comfortable introduction to Tulli's fiction. But while the novel does provide somewhat more of the familiar elements of conventional fiction, it nevertheless doesn't allow the reader to retreat altogether to conventional reading pleasures. If there are identifiable characters who are “developed” over the course of the narrative, there is no one character whom we are invited to regard as a protagonist. Indeed, while a succession of characters is introduced, most of them are led to the same fate—early death—none of them are characters with whom we are likely to “identify.” Most of the focus is on figures of prominence and authority, primarily businessmen, and these characters in particular tend to blend together, as if each such character is another version of the previous. The procession of new characters in turn produces the novel's narrative structure: a chronicle of notable personages and events in Stichings, a (fictional) town in a (fictional) province of northern Poland.

Stichings itself is really the main character in *In Red*, tracking what happens there through roughly the first half of the 20th century its primary concern. In this way it is perhaps not a radical departure from *Dreams and Stones*, adding people and their interactions to the portrayal of a city, superimposing their “story” on the story of the city's growth. Although Stichings regresses as much as or more than it progresses (at the end of the novel it is consumed by fire), it could be said to serve the same function in this novel, in a less overt, more outwardly disguised way, as the city does in Tulli's first novel: as the vehicle for an allegorical representation of the act of literary creation. *In Red*'s enactment of this allegory calls less attention to itself and for the most part remains implicit, but the framing of the novel clearly enough emphasizes the symmetries of commencing and concluding the act of storytelling: “Whoever has been everywhere and seen everything,” the novel begins

last of all should pay a visit to Stichings. Simply take a seat in a sleigh and, before being overcome by sleep, speed across a plain that's as empty as a blank sheet of paper, boundless as life itself. Sooner or later this someone—perhaps it is a traveling salesman

with a valise full of samples—will see great mounds of snow stretching along streets to the four corners of the earth, toward empty, icy expanses.

The novel's closing lines if anything make the parallel between the story of *Stichings* and the invocation of fictional worlds through writing even more apparent:

Traveling salesman in search of happiness or deliverance: if you wish to leave *Stichings*, do not hesitate for a moment: you have to do it between the capital letter and the period, without any broken-off thought, without waiting for the final word.

That the novel focuses on the act of creating a fictional “place” such as *Stichings* does not mean it fails to maintain the illusion that *Stichings* is a “real” place. Polish readers would no doubt find its details and its portrait of the life of the city entirely genuine; for the rest of us, the illusion of reality certainly seems complete. The characters, however much they are deliberately made to echo and repeat, are still credible, recognizable human beings. The stories of success, failure, and misadventure in which they are involved are likewise recognizable and recognizably human. The reader could take the overtures to the “traveling salesman” as invitations to enter into the fictional portrayal of *Stichings* and its inhabitants, without necessarily reflecting on the process of literary composition or interpreting the mechanisms involved. Readers could certainly enjoy *In Red* as a lively narrative of the notable events in an out-of-the-way corner of Europe, although not so out-of-the-way that we can't see ourselves reflected in the people living there.

However, while *In Red* could be appreciated for its more conventional, if at times eccentric, treatment of plot, character, and setting, such an appreciation would remain incomplete without the opportunity to situate this novel in the context of Tulli's still evolving body of work. The access that Archipelago now gives us to this work in full allows us to see that Tulli is a writer who begins in an awareness of the artificiality of literary creation and the independent logic expressed by stories, but who has also endeavored to embody these concerns in narratives that appeal to familiar expectations of literary narrative. Even if we still cannot say that through these translations we can apprehend Tulli's most immediate engagement of these concerns with the resources of the Polish language, nor can we experience the historical and cultural resonances of the depiction of this period in Polish history as readily as Polish readers, we can, thanks to the work of both the publisher and translator Bill Johnston, make a more concerted effort to estimate the achievement of this writer than we can with most writers we can know only through

translation. My own tentative judgment is that her achievement is considerable, perhaps even singular, in the way it enlists “postmodern” strategies to further traditional goals of storytelling.

### **Meredith Quartermain**

Since the trifurcation of “Poetry” (roughly in the 18th century) into the three genres that in turn came to comprise the category of “literature” — poetry (primarily lyric poetry), fiction, and drama — the phenomenon of writers crossing the boundaries of these now three separate literary forms has not exactly been rare. Thomas Hardy was a great poet and a great novelist. Samuel Beckett was a great playwright and a great fiction writer. Edgar Allan Poe was equally adept at lyric poetry and short stories.

However, the divide between forms, especially between fiction and poetry, has arguably become even thinner, evident not only in prominent postwar writers who found success as novelists after beginning as poets (Gilbert Sorrentino, Denis Johnson, Sherman Alexie), or maintained parallel careers as novelists and poets (John Updike, Marge Piercy, Raymond Carver). It could be argued that the American fiction of the 1960s and 70s now considered “postmodern” was inherently a language-centered fiction that in disrupting conventional narrative forms substituted broadly poetic structures in their place (Donald Barthelme or John Hawkes), while some writers, nominally writing prose, were as gifted at figuration as any poet (Stanley Elkin or William Gass). More recently, writers who have been identified as the “school of Lish” (novelist, teacher, and editor extraordinaire Gordon Lish), including Gary Lutz, Diane Williams, and Christine Schutt, have brought attention to the sonic and syntactical effects of the sentence in a way that often compels us to regard one of their compositions at least as much as a poem as a “story” in order to fully appreciate its aesthetic character.

The increasing popularity of the prose poem among current poets has itself brought the two forms into closer proximity, through the confluence of prose poetry and what is called “flash fiction.” Not all writers of flash fiction, of course, regard it as a version of prose poetry, but rather as an experiment in the radical reduction of plot, character, setting, or scene to the minimum extent possible while still retaining some semblance of structure and coherence. Nevertheless, a number of such writers do blur the boundaries between prose and poetry, from both sides of the diminishing line between the two, and among those should be counted the

Canadian Meredith Quartermain, whose book *I, Bartleby* is labeled “short stories” on its cover but surely does come close to making that line all but imperceptible, if not simply irrelevant.

This is especially true of the shorter pieces included in the book’s first section. Generally fewer than two pages long, most of these begin with a motif or image that is then developed through elaboration, association, or something like a brief narrative. “A Natural History of the Thought” riffs on color, beginning with violet, which is “opposite yellow on the color wheel.” “Out of the Dark” begins as a riff on light, but then light strikes someone’s hand (presumably the writing hand of “I, Bartleby,” introduced to us in the first story as a sort of metafictional stand-in for the author), bringing its corpuscles to life (who prove resistant to the effort). The story is at once both a lyrical reverie and an allegory of the recalcitrance of inspiration. In what seems a throwaway remark, “I” tells us in “A Natural History of the Thought” that “I’ve lost my train of thought,” but this assertion proves to be a kind of clue to the method Quartermain uses in many of these pieces, as the author/narrator pursues a “line of thought” in a way that produces less than a well-ordered story but more than disconnected utterances.

Other sections of the book offer longer pieces, although they too can’t really be called short stories in any conventional sense. The metafictional framework established by the initial short pieces is carried through the rest of the book, reflected in section titles: “How to Write”; “Scriptorium.” Several of the pieces directly concern writing and language, among them “If I prefer not,” in which “I,” transposed to the third-person “She,” attempts to write about a Chinese man she has passed on the street, “Cloth Music,” literally a story about Chinese calligraphy, and “If I noiselessly,” in which “She” is contemplating writing a manifesto:

. . . why not a manifesto of the sentence? Crossbreed every kind with another kind — twist and turn the thought shapes — so many butterfly nets. *Une manifestation* of clamouring motifs. Unsentencing the sentence. Smashing the piñata of complete thought to clouds of recombining viruses.

This story takes a more poignant turn when we discover that “She” has been reflecting on this projected manifesto as she is returning from a hike to a mountaintop to scatter the ashes of her just-deceased mother, “the dust that had been her mother clinging to her jeans and boots. Breathing the dust that had been her, had made her.”

Ultimately *I, Bartleby* does balance out the self-reflexive gestures and its more conventionally dramatized “content.” “If I, scrivener, print a letter” also focuses on the death of the writer’s mother (the woman is again “I,” telling her own story), blending a consideration of color imagery with recollections of her mother and with an interpolated episode in which she loses a job. Here “I”’s preoccupation with writing and the otherwise dispersed references to apparent memories and life experiences come together to more firmly identify “I” as the protagonist of the book, even if an unorthodox and sometimes elusive presence. In “Scriptorium,” perhaps the most conventional and straightforward story in the collection, the writer/protagonist recounts childhood memories of her artist father, but this leads not to a melancholy meditation on loss. Instead the narrator relates her eventual estrangement from the father, when she realizes they “don’t speak the same language.” Again “life” is unavoidably implicated in “language.”

Two other stories in *I, Bartleby* are noteworthy as well. “The Real Fictional House of His Imagined Film Director” tells the story of Canadian novelist Malcolm Lowry and his second wife, writer Margerie Bonner, via the overlaps and echoes among their lives, as Lowry is headed to his ultimate alcoholic breakdown, and characters in their books (Lowry himself being a notoriously autobiographical writer). “Moccasin Box” focuses on 19th-century Canadian/First Nations writer and actress Pauline Johnson, whose lingering presence in and around the Vancouver landscape the narrator tracks. The story’s most conspicuous feature is its incorporation of photographs as a narrative accompaniment. Each of these stories clearly shows Quartermain’s interest in situating her own work in the context of specifically Canadian writing.

*I, Bartleby* is the kind of book some readers undoubtedly could find disorienting in its initial reluctance to provide those markers we most associate with “short stories.” By the end, however, the book has made its own alternative, less commonplace strategies sufficiently recognizable that going back to the beginning and re-reading, especially given the book’s relative brevity (118 pages), can be a highly rewarding experience, as Quartermain’s achievement becomes even more distinctly visible.

### **A.M Homes**

The books that brought A.M. Homes her initial notoriety (and her work did become rather notorious), the story collection *The Safety of Objects* (1990) and the novel *The End of*

*Alice* (1996) are clearly designed to provoke, especially in their choice of subjects. The first story in *The Safety of Objects*, "Adults Alone," chronicles the increasing degradations of a married couple who take advantage of the temporary absence of their children to behave very badly indeed (including buying and smoking crack). In "Looking for Johnny," a young boy is kidnapped by a pedophile only to be released when he turns out to be too annoying. "Slumber Party" and "A Real Doll" are disquieting accounts of pre-pubescent sexuality that evoke an atmosphere of equal parts innocence and menace. *The End of Alice*, of course, picks up the themes of predation and adolescent sexuality in its story of a child killer and his prison correspondence with an adult woman who confesses to her own desire for a young boy.

If much of this early fiction is disturbing in its content, it is also carefully crafted. The stories are narratively efficient, well-paced and skillfully structured, they make canny use of point of view, and are crisply written. Homes's style has at various times been called "minimalist," but the relative economy and transparency of style in Home's fiction is less an attempt to simplify language for its own sake than it is the result of her emphasis on plot—not so much in the sense she creates the "well-made story" but in that the stories in *The Safety of Objects* (as well as the later collection *Things You Should Know*) mostly focus on event, on what the characters do. There's not much psychological probing in these stories; in fact, the unsettling overtones in a story like "Adults Alone" are produced by the withholding of access to the characters' psychological states, leaving us to wonder what must be going through their minds as they act out in their newly found freedom from responsibility. The lack of "poetic" affectation in Home's prose style keeps our attention centered on the actions that, at the same time, we must ourselves attempt to understand absent any more directly provided psychological motivation.

*The End of Alice* is not structured as a linear narrative, although there certainly is some "development" in the protagonist's situation and state of mind from the beginning of the novel to its conclusion, nor is there a single "plot" aside from the visible stages in this development. Instead, the novel parcels out the actions in three separate, alternating stories—of the aging pedophile and his experiences in prison, of the young woman and her attempts to seduce the young object of her desire, and, ultimately, of the narrator's encounter with "Alice," the twelve-year-old girl for whose murder the narrator was convicted. As in the short stories, however, the intertwining plots in *The End of Alice* are presented with all due attention to dramatic effect, to

their potential for mystery and suspense. Even though the first-person narrative allows for some degree of discursive meandering, this is done primarily in the service of character creation, as it draws us, unwillingly perhaps, closer to the "human" side of an otherwise monstrous character.

The narrator never exactly comes to seem a likable character, but that we must suspend our judgment of him until his chronicle is complete, and must inevitably accept that he is both a human being and a monster, is surely the most immediate reason *The End of Alice* is a disconcerting book to read, even before we can assimilate the often abhorrent events the narrator relates. Homes manages this atmospheric balance very well, sustaining the intrepid reader's forbearance until the narrator finally arrives at his moment of reckoning at the novel's conclusion. This is not the only aesthetic success Homes achieves through her use of the pedophile narrator, however. That he does come to acknowledge the reality of his crime only at the very end of the novel means that, at least in retrospect (although the reader will have suspected as much all along), the narrator's entire account must be distrusted, that he is an unreliable narrator of the most radical sort. It is possible that everything he has told us--about his female correspondent and her trysts with the young boy, about his own past, perhaps even about his ongoing experiences in the prison--is a fiction of his own making. It has always seemed possible, even probable, that his narration of the young lady's actions has been an embellishment of her letters, the details largely provided by the narrator's imagination, but ultimately we can't really be sure of the existence of either the girl or the letters.

It seems unlikely that Homes would expect this most radical reading of her narrator's unreliability, but the character she has created and the story she wants to tell require that she exploit the potential for dramatic irony and the inherent uncertainties and possibilities for deception (including self-deception) implicit in the use of first-person narration to the fullest, and thus nothing prevents us from regarding the entire narrative, the narrator's "confession" as a whole, as fictional not just in the sense that it has been invented by the novelist but as the character's own fiction, contrived by him during the time of its telling. At the very least, this possibility ought to prompt those who recoil from this novel's depiction of a child killer and his mentally unbalanced fan to consider that what Homes is offering us is not so much a sensational story about unspeakable acts but an extended verbal portrait of a diseased mind, one that avoids the conventional strategies of "psychological realism"—“exploring” consciousness through the

"free indirect" mode—by letting the character speak to us directly, but also creating the possibility we might need to read his words skeptically, assuming he might not exactly be speaking the truth. Taken this way, should we really be surprised the novel confronts us with a morally compromised character whose account of himself reflects his morally degraded state?

I would not contend that *The End of Alice* is really an ingenious work of metafiction that is more about the processes and implications of fiction-making than child sexual abuse or prison life. However, to read the book as at least partially metafictional does not reduce it to literary game-playing, nor does it lessen the novel's visceral impact. The insights into the mind and habits of a child rapist/murderer are just as sound, the juxtaposition of his story and that of his correspondent is just as chilling, and the voice Homes has provided her sociopathic narrator is just as creepily seductive whether we accept his recital of the "facts" as literal or whether we assume he is dissembling. Further, regarding the pedophile narrator as also an author of fiction if anything only makes the novel more provocative. If as the story of a notorious child killer it forces us to confront the reality that such people exist, on its second level as implied metafiction it asks us to consider the creation of such a story in the first place—what is more disturbing, the actions of a sociopathic child molester and murderer, or the imagination of the writer who finds it must be extended to this sort of character? The subject of *The End of Alice* may seem extreme, but isn't the literary imagination itself drawn to extremity? Isn't it the job of the literary imagination to inhabit human experiences about which we might prefer not to know?

Homes's later novels certainly depict characters themselves in extremity, but they represent a shift away from both the thematic concerns and the formal assumptions of *The End of Alice*. These novels drop the metafictional frame and concentrate solely on the often extravagant actions and frenetic events in which they become embroiled. They are more straightforwardly comic in tone (although the comedy is never very far away from terror), and where Alice is tightly and rather intricately structured, they are much looser, resolutely more linear, essentially picaresque narratives in which one thing follows another. They retreat to the suburbs as their setting, where anomie and negligence prevail rather than radical evil. They are still clearly intended to provoke, but more through their absurdist humor than through metaphysical and psychosexual inquiry.

The first of these novels, *Music For Torching* (1999), takes the married couple of "Adults Alone" and follows them as they engage in more bad behavior, including setting their own home on fire. The narrative of their actions is not exactly surreal, although the reader does have to accept that both the characters and the situation are at such a point of maximum disorder that practically anything might happen. Generally this makes the novel seem suspended precariously between farce and tragedy, a delicate act that is somewhat undone by the decidedly grave event at the novel's conclusion. This version of black humor elevates the novel (as well as Homes's subsequent novels) beyond suburban social satire, although some satirical elements are inevitably present. Too much is at stake, and there is simultaneously so little indication that the behavior and milieu depicted are open to amelioration through mockery, for us to rest safe in the more comforting assumptions of satire. The relentless progression of the story, here and in the subsequent novels, toward disarray and confusion creates an impression that the fate endured by the characters is simply a consequence of being alive and human.

*Music for Torching* is the first of Homes's novels to incorporate what in a later interview she described as "an everything but the kitchen sink" strategy, "where you're constantly adding something on top" of what came before, in order to keep the narrative "moving forward." Homes further contends that this is "reflective of what many people's lives are like," but certainly Homes concentrates on that period in her characters' lives in which the succession of events is almost unceasingly calamitous, whereby the kitchen sink is eventually filled with mostly muck and debris. Somewhat similar to the way the Naturalist novel sends its characters on a trajectory of inevitable disaster, these novels chronicle what seem inescapably unhappy experiences. In this way, they are still clearly intended to disturb, but they rely less on disturbing images, situations, or psychologically questionable characters and more on plot itself for this effect.

*This Book Will Save Your Life* (2007) and Homes's most recent novel, *May We Be Forgiven*, perhaps enact this strategy even more emphatically, in a way that makes them to a degree seem continuous with each other. Both books focus on a middle-aged male protagonist who suddenly seems to lose control of his heretofore stable life. *This Book Will Save Your Life* begins with its protagonist, Richard Novak, a wealthy player of the stock market, looking out his window as if seeing what is outside it for the first time, realizing that "Everything today is not the same, and yet it is exactly the same and it can never be the same again." Almost

simultaneously he has acquired a mysterious, crippling pain throughout his body and he has noticed a sinkhole forming in his yard. He has been shaken out of his expectation that everything will continue to be "exactly the same," and his sense that "it can never be the same again" is confirmed continuously as he now begins a journey in the world he has previously kept safely on the other side of that window glass.

The journey takes place very much in a serial, picaresque fashion, the story moving relentlessly ahead, with seemingly little regard for workshop notions of "arc" or narrative shapeliness. The events depicted aren't exactly random, as clearly, at least in the initial stages of Novak's odyssey, Homes is subjecting him to the forces of disorder, as if after avoiding his share of bad fortune for so long, he is now encountering it all at once. Eventually forced to leave his home because the sinkhole continues to grow larger, Novak becomes a kind of involuntary picaro making his way through a Los Angeles he almost literally has never seen before. Eventually he winds up in a beach house in Malibu, where another natural disaster overtakes him at the end of the novel, but along the way he does encounter—In this case, more or less randomly—a group of characters, including the owner of a doughnut shop, an alienated housewife, and a famous writer (although Novak does not know he is famous), who, as he gets to know them, do begin not just to help him accommodate himself to his new reality but to act as the catalysts for his transformation into a more aware and charitable human being. He also begins to repair his relationship with his son, with whom he has had little constructive contact since his divorce.

Novak's tentative redemption is certainly tempered by the novel's portrayal of Los Angeles as a strange and synthetic place itself hardly supportive of human happiness, its indifference epitomized by the near-apocalyptic mudslide that sweeps Novak into the sea in the novel's concluding scene. Still, *This Book Will Save Your Life* winds up being much more affirming of the possibility for real human connection, of the existence of sincere, non-exploitive human emotion, than her previous work would have prepared us to expect. This quality is, however, sufficiently modulated by the persisting sense things could still spiral out of control without warning that the novel doesn't seem sentimental or the affirmation forced.

Nonetheless, *This Book Will Save Your Life* received mixed reviews at best, while some outright pronounced the novel a failure. Ron Charles dismissed it as a "tepid satire," criticizing

the novel's narrative as one in which the protagonist "meanders through a series of chance encounters," both misunderstanding its ambition and failing to appreciate its picaresque strategy. If its intent was indeed primarily satirical, one might with cause find it rather tepid in its force, but Homes is not a satirist, however much her fiction takes present attitudes and social arrangements as the superficial patina overlaying setting and incident. Homes seems most interested in the more elemental impulses motivating her characters, the expressions of which work themselves out in the specific milieu in which the characters find themselves. Likewise, one could say the narrative "meanders," but of course this finally is to say merely that a picaresque narrative, after all an old and venerable form, is one that by design meanders.

One could more with more justice claim that the most recent novel, *May We Be Forgiven*, simply repeats the strategy and many of the themes of *This Book Will Save Your Life*. Again a picaresque story focusing on the simultaneous disintegration and renewal of a middle-aged man's suddenly eventful life, it doesn't finally provide any new variation on the strategy employed successfully by its predecessor, although if anything the first half of *May We Be Forgiven* is more harrowing in its chronicle of protagonist Harold Silver's plunge into chaos than the parallel account of Richard Novak's less radical change in circumstances. Silver commits adultery with his brother's wife, and is caught in bed with her by the brother, who kills his wife but spares Silver. This leads to the end of Silver's own marriage, and Silver's misfortune culminates in the loss of his job as a history professor (specializing in Richard Nixon). Along the way he also has to deal with the legal and financial consequences of brother George's act, which eventually become very bizarre indeed.

George's children have become orphans, so Silver must also begin caring for them, something he is completely unprepared to do. Suffice it to say that it is Silver's experiences with the children that begin to lead him on the path to reintegration not unlike the one followed by Richard Novak, except that in this case Homes doesn't quite avoid sentimentality and the impression that Silver is being force marched on the way to deliverance so that the novel and its "vision" might be appropriately balanced between the horrors of the novel's first half and the possibility for hope in alternatives increasingly communicated in the second. Silver also acquires an additional family of friends who at first are strangers to him, similar to Novak's chance encounters with people to whom he becomes attached, and while some of these characters and

the circumstances in which Silver meets them are "quirky" in a pleasing enough way, his motley collection of acquaintances is so transparently transformed into an "alternative family" the effect at best simply falls flat, at worst is such an implausible solution to the existential dilemma faced by such characters as Harold Silver and Richard Novak it's a little hard to believe Homes expects it to be taken seriously. At times Silver's reshuffling of priorities becomes almost embarrassingly trite, as in the extended sequence in which he takes his now virtually adopted children to South Africa and engages in good works on behalf of the local population.

The extreme contrast between the darkness that envelops Silver's life in the first part of *May We Be Forgiven* and the light that has come into it by the end of the novel is an even more pronounced development of the affirmative impulse introduced in *This Book Will Save Your Life*. But where the qualified optimism implied by Richard Novak's awakening to life outside his privileged sanctuary seems aesthetically well-calibrated, if decidedly a break from the bleaker vision expressed in her earlier fiction, in *May We Be Forgiven*, Harold Silver's transformation is both unconvincing and aesthetically unjustified, as if the picaresque must inevitably culminate in "growth" or otherwise lead to a hopeful conclusion. The first book might have been taken as a fuller exploration of the "everything but the kitchen sink" approach begun with *Music for Torching*, but *May We Be Forgiven* seems both superfluous and a repudiation of the bracing, clear-eyed chronicles of human depravity to be found in *The Safety of Objects* and *The End of Alice*.

In this way this latest novel is a rather ominous portent. On the one hand, that Homes might be interested in pursuing the further possibilities of her version of the picaresque form is commendable, as this is a form whose potential is greatly underrated. On the other, if she has now seized upon it as the vehicle for conveying a new, and ultimately sentimental, version of a fallen world now amenable to reform through good intentions and a positive attitude, I, for one, don't think she'll any longer have anything very inspired to contribute to American fiction.

### **Sad and Bad and Mad: The Fiction of Rosalyn Drexler**

Perhaps it is because her most lasting accomplishment may turn out to be her paintings that Rosalyn Drexler is now so very little known as a writer of fiction. Although she did attract attention with her novels in the 1970s, and her plays gained notice for their association with the "theater of the ridiculous," a kind of variation on theater of the absurd, it seems safe to say that

for most current readers and critics Rosalyn Drexler has almost no name recognition. Perhaps the novels to an extent seem dated, their cultural references and lingo too stuck in the 60s and 70s (although ultimately they are not at all trying to "capture" their era in any direct way). Or perhaps Drexler has simply been overshadowed by the already established experimental writers of her time, most of whom are male, even at a time when efforts are regularly made, by academics and publishers, to maintain attention on neglected women writers.

Still, that little effort has been made to refocus our attention on the fiction of Rosalyn Drexler remains rather surprising, for her novels are indeed singular achievements, adventurous works that are entirely worthy of comparison with the other heterodox writing of the period that has persisted in the cultural memory. Moreover, while Drexler's work is not feminist in a directly political way, it most assuredly does provide a representation of women and their circumstances that feminist critics ought to find deeply resonant (something that could be said about Drexler's paintings as well). And if many of the novels do indeed reflect the social and cultural tendencies of their time, they also use those tendencies to render more broadly and enduringly relevant accounts of women freely expressing their own versions of their lived experience and in the process freeing themselves of the versions imposed by others.

Certainly those expressions are unconventional and often extreme. Drexler's narratives have been described as "grotesque," but they might simply be called "weird," which more appropriately evokes their antic, less terror-fraught character. Her first novel, *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* (1966), is perhaps the least strange but also most disturbing, at once both extreme and recognizable in the means by which it provokes an uneasy response. Upon the novel's publication, comparisons were made to *Catcher in the Rye*, but while it is not preposterous to regard the narrator of *I Am the Beautiful Stranger*, Selma, as analogous to Holden Caulfield, at least insofar as each of them is an impulsive adolescent encountering the corruptions of the adult world, it is misleading to the extent it suggests that Selma is mostly disgusted by this world, that her primary objective is to escape such corruption. What makes this novel disquieting--which its contemporaneous readers surely found it--is that its protagonist often seems as eager to cultivate the wickedness she recounts as evade it.

In this way *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* seems less an episodic coming-of-age story in the manner of *Catcher in the Rye* than a purposeful reconfiguration of the form into one that can

accommodate an adolescent girls' emotional confusion, which, at least as depicted in this novel, is no less strong than the adolescent boy's (and vice versa) but also more capacious, more subject to conflicting impulses. If Selma is less quick than Holden Caulfield to pronounce adults to be "phony," perhaps this is because she is more ambivalent about her own relation to the adult world, not as unwilling as Holden to sully herself in its imperfections. At the same time she is fully aware of the debased behavior to which she is frequently subjected, she also affirms the authentic sexual and emotional needs that are awakened in her as well. Sharing a room with cousins on their wedding night, she hears them having sex: "Becoming another white nun of solitude. I crossed myself in mock Catholic, fingered my beads of sweat, confessed confusion, and tried to sleep by practicing a sin that is not a sin in my religion. It isn't even mentioned except about men, and they're not supposed to spill their seed upon the ground. I'm safe, I don't spill, and if I did I wouldn't cry."

Selma's progress toward self-awareness is not without its psychological toll, however:

Wow, was I sad and bad and mad! I slashed the outside of my hands with a razor. I made deep criss-crosses in the flesh. A rehearsal of self-destruction? There wasn't much blood because the lines were so fine. I scarred my hands. It was easy to do because it didn't hurt. Even my brain was numb. Afterwards I bought pancake makeup to cover the cuts.

Although many of Selma's relationships with other people--specifically men—are purely exploitive--with Uncle Mort, for example, who, while dancing with her at the cousin's wedding, inserts his tongue in Selma's mouth and "slid it around"—and clearly enough might send her on a course of self-destruction, she does manage to achieve healthier connections with some. At the novel's conclusion, Selma has a boyfriend, Paul, and they are contemplating living together (even at Selma's young age). It seems to be a "normal" relationship, yet it is finally difficult to tell whether Selma's final words signal she is emerging into self-possessed maturity or is still captive to the damaging influences precipitating neediness her narrative reveals: "What if I have to stay appealing every day? When my panic is over I know just what I'll do: go south and make myself a beauty. I'll return wrapped in tan like a carmallow. Then, when Paul peels my wrapper off, the sweet taste of fresh Selma should make him crave me forever."

Selma has an abundant fantasy life, to the point that the reader must be cautious in assuming that events she appears to be recounting are indeed drawn from her actual experiences rather than the product of Selma's imagining. Finally, however, it is "true" to Selma's circumstances as an adolescent American girl growing up in the environment she evokes to say her fantasies reflect the generally abusive examples set by the adults around her as that she in fact encountered a specific instance of such abuse. Something similar is true of Drexler's second novel, *One or Another* (1970), although here the circumstances of the protagonist have been reversed: Melissa, a 39-year-old woman who has become disillusioned with her marriage is having an affair (or imagines having an affair) with a 17-year-old high school student (her husband's student), himself a troubled boy having difficulty facing the prospect of encroaching adulthood.

If Selma is groping for her place in the adult world, at least as that place is defined for young women of her time, Melissa has her place but, to say the least, finds it wanting. *One or Another* was published as the women's movement was just beginning to assert its own place in the American cultural consciousness, so perhaps it is not surprising that in Drexler's novel her protagonist rebels against her circumstances by envisioning her independence as betrayal—taking his student as lover and later forming a relationship with a black student her husband has racially harassed—rather than literally leaving the marriage to pursue her own course. Indeed, Melissa lives even more resolutely inside her own head, a condition she seems to affirm in the novel's final lines, than did Selma, and the novel for which she serves as narrator is even more firmly than Selma's a possibly imagined construction, not an account of her literal actions.

It would not be entirely accurate to call novels like *I Am the Beautiful Stranger* and *One or Another* metafictional, since their effect depends on the possibility we might take their actions as literal after all, that they are fictions soliciting our suspension of disbelief, a disbelief that is stretched but not ultimately broken. Even if we start asking ourselves whether these two main characters might be unreliable narrators freely engaging in fantasy and invention, that they are doing so itself provides insight about them as autonomous characters whose stories still have coherence, however discontinuous or fragmentary. Certainly Drexler's novels are formally adventurous, incorporating not just diary-like sections of direct exposition and narration (most of the novels are primarily first-person narratives), but also letters and notes, brief play-like

passages of dialogue, graphic illustrations, purported newspaper articles, and, in the later novels, emails. (*Art Does (Not) Exist* (1996) also presents transcripts of its protagonist's experimental videos.) Still, their unorthodox methods seem intended as the appropriate artistic strategies for conveying Drexler's eccentric, if unsettling, comic vision of American life.

"Eccentric" is an admittedly vague term to use in describing the prevailingly comic tone and manner of Drexler's fiction, but its humor is not exactly easy to classify. As a playwright, Drexler was sometimes vaguely grouped with the "theater of the ridiculous" movement of the 1960s associated with the director John Vaccaro, and while her fiction may also have some affinities with the anarchic qualities of this style of theatrical comedy, it is again more singularly weird than recognizably campy. This weirdness does have a lighter touch to it that also makes Drexler's work accord uneasily with absurdism, as well as the Freudian underpinnings of surrealism, and while this apparent lightness often enough partly conceals a darker view of human behavior, Drexler's novels don't really depend on the kind of jokiness or exploded logic characteristic of black humor fiction. In her weaker books (*Starburn*, for example) the humor can seem too calculated, overly mannered, but as a whole her novels feature a kind of comedy that on the surface may seem blithely tongue-in-cheek but upon further contemplation begins to take on a more consequential gravity.

The same thing might be said about Drexler's visual art, arguably about pop art in general, to which Drexler's painting is most often referred. At first glance, her paintings are colorful and cartoonish, created by using pre-existing photographs—often from ads and graphic illustrations—on and around which she applied paint. And indeed any one of these paintings has an immediate sensory impact, the best ones almost mesmerizing in their ostensible simplicity. But put it among other of Drexler's canvases and the tacit, unobtrusive critique of American predispositions and attitudes (especially toward women) becomes, through implicit though indirect mockery, quite evident. Neither Drexler's paintings nor her fiction could properly be called satirical, since the impulse behind them is much more equivocal—at the same time her images and narratives highlight the tackiness of American culture, they also manage to give that tackiness an aesthetically pleasing form—than directly critical and prescriptive. The fiction, however, is more direct in presenting a broadly comic perspective that at times is deliberately outrageous.

Certainly in her fiction Drexler is just as likely to seize on images and motifs from popular culture as subjects. The best illustration of this perhaps is her third novel, *To Smithereens* (1972), which features a lady wrestler as protagonist and is perhaps her best known work of fiction, largely because it draws on Drexler's own experience as a wrestler before she became established as an artist. As in many of the paintings, here Drexler uses the iconography associated with this figure from popular culture to evoke attitudes and beliefs about the pervasive violence of American culture and the confused state of relations between men and women. The latter is signaled in the novel's first scene, narrated by Rosa (later to be proclaimed "Rosa Carlo, the Mexican Spitfire"), who in a movie theater encounters a "creep" in the next seat rubbing his hand on her thigh. Rosa is duly annoyed, expressing her annoyance by lashing out at him, yet after the movie agrees to have coffee with him and then goes to his apartment, where soon she waits for him in the bedroom: "I took off my clothes and lay on top of the blanket, still as death, one arm dangling off the side of the mattress; I knew I looked beautiful that way; soft, receptive, passively offering my body. . . ."

The creep is (once again) named Paul, in this case an art critic, and he and Rosa are soon a couple. But while in this scene Rosa chooses to be sexually passive, throughout the novel she continues to exhibit both the aggressiveness she displayed in the movie theater (and which presumably she channels in her short career as a wrestler) and a more conventional acceptance of gendered sexual roles. (When she decides to try wrestling Rosa discovers a lesbian subculture among the women wrestlers, but she does not take part.) Still, while Paul in a sense is trying to exploit Rosa for his own enjoyment when he encourages her to try wrestling, his efforts to control her cannot succeed, as he himself acknowledges:

Rosa did not conform to any idea I had conceived of her in advance. She related to me with the same sense of immediacy and beauty that the artist experiences in relation to her material. She was molding me on behalf of the vast world of being she existed in; while I had foolishly believed it was I who was shaping her.

The point of view in *To Smithereens* alternates between Paul and Rosa (with the usual additional interpolated documents), and this provides overall a somewhat more detached perspective from which the reader can contemplate the comic verbal collage Drexler has assembled, although undoubtedly Rosa emerges from the novel a character as forceful as Paul

himself finds her. The novel does not really dwell much on Rosa's actual time in the wrestling ring (only one match is recounted at any length), preferring just to introduce us to the colorful characters with whom Rosa interacts and to create a female character who embodies in her life the "sense of immediacy and beauty that the artist experiences in relation to her material" but has perhaps not yet quite found the best "material" in which to express it.

*The Cosmopolitan Girl* (1974) is the last of the original series of novels that made Drexler known as a writer as well as an artist. (It is available, along with *I Am The Beautiful Stranger* and *One or Another*, in a volume simply called *Three Novels*, published by Verbivoracious Press, the only fiction by Drexler officially in print.) This might be called Drexler's weirdest novel (an accomplishment in itself). Certainly it is the most openly surreal, featuring a protagonist with a talking dog, a dog she winds up marrying to boot. While this blending of Kafka and Helen Gurley Brown is alternately kooky and spooky, perhaps it also represents Drexler's most faithful translation of the Pop sensibility characteristic of her paintings to fiction, provoking equal parts disquiet, amusement, and something like annoyance. It can be difficult to decide whether we should find Helen Jones a sympathetic character just attempting to find happiness in the big wide world, or an appalling freak. Perhaps she is both. The media image of the Cosmo Girl becomes not exactly the object of satire, nor is it celebrated as a fabulous icon of popular culture, although certainly Drexler does occasionally have fun with it:

At home I walk around with no clothes on at all (depending on whether the steam is up). I do not bother to pull down the shade. If someone in the building opposite wants to look, he's welcome. If someone doesn't like it, that's his problem. I do what makes me feel good. . .but not always. It's a hard rule to follow because sometimes I'm not sure what does please me.

*The Cosmopolitan Girl* can be regarded as the completion of an initial quartet of singular but aesthetically consistent novels that introduce both a thematically and formally complex literary practice Drexler continues to pursue in her later fiction but that probably is carried out most successfully in these four novels. Unquestionably it would be warranted to claim Drexler's project as part of post-60s feminism, but the women characters in these novels are neither unequivocal champions of equality nor emblematic figures exemplifying the inherent virtues of their gender. Ultimately each of these characters is emblematic only of herself, although together

they do have enough similarities that they collectively comprise a kind of Drexlerian prototype: autonomous, but not without a lingering dependency, self-aware but also at times willfully capricious.

These qualities can certainly be seen in the protagonists of *Starburn* (1979), Drexler's next novel written under her own name (following on a series of "novelizations" of screenplays—most notably, *Rocky*—using the pen name "Julia Sorel"), as well as *Art Does (Not) Exist*. The first concerns the travails of Jenni Love, punk rock singer, who stands accused of murdering a music critic (she is innocent of the charge), while the second focuses on Julia Maraini, a video artist trying to revive her career. Both characters are assertive, self-directed artists who nevertheless make poor decisions and find themselves in predicaments they must scramble to overcome. Both novels as well follow *The Cosmopolitan Girl* in assimilating the surreal, in the case of *Starburn* through a sci-fi subplot involving alien abduction, and in *Art Does (Not) Exist* through scenes featuring talking skeletons. Of these two novels, *Art Does (Not) Exist* is the most successful, the closest to equaling the early novels, perhaps because the subject more strongly engages Drexler's own experiences, while *Starburn* seems somewhat awkwardly sensationalized.

*Bad Guy* (1982) and *Vulgar Lives* (2007) may be Drexler's least characteristic novels, although ultimately they are not necessarily less revealing of her intentions or her lasting achievements as a writer of fiction. Both novels seem more austere in subject (although not without their moments of absurdity), less formally frenetic (although by no means straightforwardly conventional). While the ostensible protagonist of each is its female narrator, the real protagonist in both might be the male figure on which the narrator's account focuses, although perhaps it is most accurate to describe both books as explorations of these women's capacity to sustain themselves in a male-centered world without losing either their dignity or literally their sanity. *Bad Guy* especially seems an almost sobering account of its main character—an experimental therapist—and her ultimately failed effort both to help a delinquent boy and to have her professional reputation affirmed, while *Vulgar Lives* addresses a more charged subject—incest—but in applying Drexler's signature fragmented collage method to its protagonist's dissociating mental state the novel actually produces a formal structure that more nearly functions as a recognizably unified objective correlative.

Nevertheless, all of Rosalyn Drexler's fiction is readily identifiable as the work of a distinctive sensibility, one that in her early fiction revealed itself as unabashed in its iconoclasm and that Drexler has maintained throughout her work as a novelist with a truly remarkable constancy, despite the fact that most of her books have been indefensibly ignored by critics (among whom I am myself until now obviously included). This neglect can't be rectified until more of her work is again in print, of course, and this would be a worthy project for any independent press willing to perform such a service for American fiction. Then the effort to properly assess Rosalyn Drexler's place in the efflorescence of innovative fiction in post-WWII American literature could begin.