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Life's Beauty & Hardships

Judith Podell

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

I like to divide short stories into two fundamental types: tales—those stories where the true subject is fate—and bulletins from the front lines of “How We Live Now.” Although I can be captivated by fabulists and seduced by sheer storytelling power, the short story writers I’m most partial to these days are the ones who write about the bewildering present with empathy and panache: Anne Enright and Mary Gaitskill, for example. Jen Grow won me over with her very first sentences in *My Life as a Mermaid*, winner of the Dzanc Books Short Story Competition. Global awareness has never seemed more poignant:

I get another letter from my sister who is in Honduras riding mules and skidding around the muddy mountain roads in a pickup truck. The roads have curves sharp enough to invite death, sharp enough to see yourself leaving. When the priest drives, she writes, he is the real danger, his faith too strong to be cautious.

How impossible it seems to her that these worlds are connected: her sister Kay’s life as a medical relief worker in Honduras and her own, the world of “marriage, motherhood and matching socks,” and that both lives connect to a shared childhood. Passionate swimmers, they used to pretend to be mermaids holding underwater tea parties. She’s tried to teach her children to jump waves and dive, but they stick to the shallows, fearful around water like their father. Kay writes of swimming in rivers surrounded by mango trees, but it’s her own ordinary life that seems stranger. Some days she feels like she’s living at the bottom of an aquarium, littered with toys; Gulliver pinned down by Lilliputians, Gulliver with responsibilities: “I ask, how on earth can I, from here, straighten up the world? Absorb all the spills.” With heartsick distractedness she writes letters to her sister that she forgets to mail, stuffs small checks to UNICEF into pre-addressed envelopes, and tries to sensitize her family to the conditions of the world’s poor in ways that won’t undermine their health. She serves rice and onions for dinner—it’s what Kay eats in Honduras, and it’s a meal traditionally eaten by hand. The children love the chance to dispense with table manners and eat dinner with their fingers instead of forks. This is play for them, not an educational experience, and even she recognizes how impossible it is to pretend she is anywhere but in her own home.

“You’re suffering from guilt,” my husband tells me. “Did you call your therapist?” It’s not guilt, I want to explain. “It’s something else.”

Grow’s sentences have sharp curves and the rhythm of a fast ride on a narrow bumpy road. Every word does the work of five. With wit, nerve and a sure hand at the wheel, she takes us to dangerous places like Motel swimming pools, deathbeds, and other rough neighborhoods, in the company of desperate women facing moments of truth; “unsympathetic characters” some of them, like the cheating wife in “Stray,” the free-lance home-wrecker of “I Get There Late” or the alcoholic mother in “What Girls Leave Behind” who engage our sympathy immediately with their fierce honesty and sense of the absurd. This is what it’s like to raise two daughters and lose custody:

Some days I was sick and couldn’t lift my head from the pillow, and some days I was moody and strong, the wrong side of a storm. They’d play games with each other: you be the vampire this time, but NO biting.”OK.” Then, two minutes later, a scream.

This is what the underside of life looks like: Death is clumsy, full of vomit and laughter, and awkward moments of forgiveness. A suburban driveway can be a mine field while some of the roughest neighborhoods may contain unexpected amenities, like the abandoned truck in “Joe Blow,” home for a

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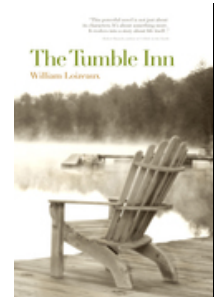
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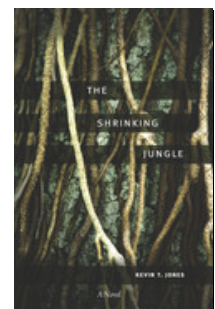
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level, but they never quite made it, despite their clear affection for each other.

McKersie's story is also one of the dilemmas of liberal intellectuals, touching on issues such as the importance of academic freedom and the balancing act faced by a busy activist with publishing obligations. In at least one case, local business leaders tried to pressure the dean to silence this untenured professor who spent much time marching and participating in boycotts and other direct action when some said he should have been producing publications. Fortunately for McKersie,

his dean supported his right to speak his mind and act on his principles, and much of the organizing he participated in offered him first-hand observations he could incorporate into his research on labor and management.

A Decisive Decade adds much to our knowledge of the northern civil rights movement, and it serves as both a primary and a secondary source for anyone interested in this field. Historians are beginning to focus more on what northern activists were doing in cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia while their friends and

colleagues were marching through Alabama and leading Freedom Schools and voting drives in Mississippi. McKersie's book adds significantly to this evolving body of scholarship.

Beverly Tomek is a historian of civil rights movements in the U.S. In addition to books that focus on African colonization and antislavery, she has written articles about the twentieth century civil rights movement, most recently focusing on Freedom Summer and Freedom Schools. She is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Houston-Victoria.

LIFE'S BEAUTY & HARDSHIPS

Judith Podell

MY LIFE AS A MERMAID

Jen Grow

Dzanc Books

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144 Pages; Paper, \$14.95

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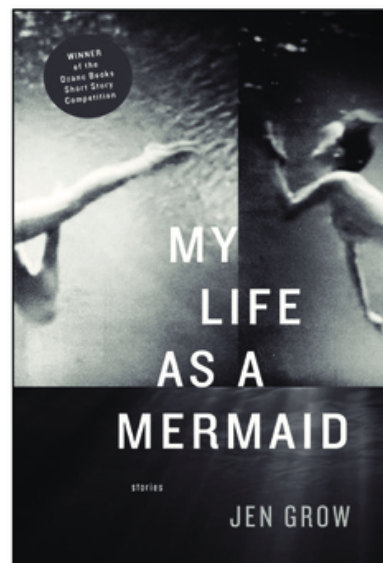
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to the drug dealer’s daughter. You’d think the new neighbor who takes it upon himself to sweep up trash on the street would be welcome, but he’s not. “Joe makes all of us look bad: he can’t leave well enough alone.” In “Lawrence Loves Somebody on Pratt Street,” Grow reminds us that the war in Iraq is close as downtown. Closer, in fact.

Grow writes of hard lives and resilience, as well as the heartbreaking waste of what was hard won. The veteran’s wife in “Still at War” describes her husband as returned to her “in a war-beaten package, one leg missing and a psyche that brewed up storms.” He’d been Boy Scout polite and steady, the man she’d married, and now he’s a thick browed stranger with a dark laugh. Silent around her and glued to the TV, he comes to life only when talking



on the phone with his war buddies. Hell yeah, he’d go back in a second if he had the chance, he tells Bruce from the Bentley Springs Baptist Church, who is writing “a remembrance piece now that the war in Iraq is nearly nine years old and practically over.” The veteran’s wife, who has laryngitis, limits her responses to the fewest words that will satisfy Bruce’s expectations. Platitudes and evasions are the script. At the VA briefing for family members, a cheery woman with a bad haircut had “skirted around the fact that who we were getting back would probably not be the same men we were waiting for,” and two psychiatric nurses handed out cards with a List of Symptoms to Watch out for. “We want to help if we can, but don’t call us unless it’s an emergency. Psychotic episodes are normal.” Anything less than a knife at the throat or hands around the neck is not an emergency, she’s told. What if he suffocates you with silence?

Grace Paley was referring to Isaac Babel and his Red Cossack stories when she spoke of the tremendous imagination it takes to understand and write about real life in its most harrowing moments. Jen Grow has that kind of imagination. These are stories that will stand up to re-readings; stories that will read fresh 30 years from now.

Judith Podell is the author of Blues for Beginners: Stories and Obsessions (2013). She received her MFA at University of Southern Maine/Stonecoast; has held fellowships at Ragdale, Hedgebrook, and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts; and writes a blues-themed blog at www.memphisearlene.com.

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