

Debuts by Award-Winning Women Writers

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These prize-winning collections introduce three women writers of remarkable talent. Sondra Spatt Olsen's *Traps*, selected by Marilynne Robinson to win the 1991 Iowa Short Fiction Award, is a selection of thirteen meticulously crafted stories about a variety of intricate emotional traps. Tangled up in one kind of a trap is Myra, the protagonist of "Who Could Love A Fat Man?," who has deliberately chosen a lover to whom she feels superior. He's fat, for one thing, and a struggling, unsuccessful writer. The story unfolds, largely in Archie's "dark labyrinthine rent-controlled apartment inherited from his long-dead parents and still choked with their paintings and heavy furniture," until the afternoon when Archie - to Myra's astonishment - wins a literary award with a cash prize. Ten suddenly the ground starts to shake: "With a booming and confident laugh, he spoke of selling his novel to the movies. That Archie owned such a laugh and had never used it before seemed to me a sign of deception; it seemed that Archie had always secretly planned to succeed."

Lois, the protagonist of "44-28," also becomes involved with a man she considers inferior (or perhaps the point is that she thinks she considers him inferior). Lois, a law professor, is older than her lover (44 to his 28) - plus, he's a gym teacher. So Lois has made a decision: "She wants to be free so that she can find a new man she may not love as much, who will be her helpmeet for the rest of her life. These are the words she is thinking of using in saying farewell to her lover, but she is already smiling at the expression she imagines she will see on his clever, sarcastic face when she says `helpmeet.'"

It is Sondra Spatt Olsen's gift with a sentence such as this, which winds around ironically to belie her protagonist's unstated intentions, that makes *Traps* such a fascinating collection. There are no wasted words here; each paragraph shimmers with taut sentences and sparsely rendered visual images. Marilynne Robinson, who also selected Elizabeth Harris's *The Ant Generator* to win the 1991 John Simmons Short Fiction Award, has complimented Harris's eleven stories for their "bemused awareness of the uncertain frontiers between the quotidian and the dreamlike." The title story is brief as a koan that deepens with successive readings. It follows a woman

named Sylvia from her magnificent early-morning dream of an electric generator powered by rows of orderly ants to a chaotic episode of violence at the end of her day. A similar, perhaps even more bewitching story is "The Green Balcony," which begins, "When she was little, Nina was like a cloud, here and there, which exasperated her mother." Nina floats along through childhood and adolescence. A citizen of her imagination as much as the world, until one day in her early twenties, she decides to sit on her balcony and fast until she has a vision. The peculiar vision she engenders - along with the backspin of its revelation, years later - gives "The Green Balcony" the kind of bemused and magical quality Robinson praises.

Many of these stories are set in Texas. The author is from Austin, and she uses the landscape of the Southwest to great effect. In stories such as "Patsy Soames's Ghost Story about Farley" or "The World Record Holder," the rhythms of southern conversation give her plots a warm, colloquial feel. In the first piece, the narrative regresses like a series of graduating dolls, one inside the next, as Farley's story is told by patsy - to our narrator, her friend at the bar. In "The World Record Holder," a woman narrates the life story of her friend, Mary Eileen Maloney, whose up and down ambitions climax when she sets a world record for balancing on one foot.

Intimate and urgent reading, Harris's stories are united by her generosity of characterization and language and her creation of agonizing realism.

What strikes the reader of Elizabeth Graver's *Have You Seen Me?*, winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, is the remarkable range of characters the author is capable of inhabiting and the unfaltering lyricism of her prose. Graver's first two stories, "Around the World" and the title piece, follow the lives of two distinct, troubled young women, one the victim of a mysterious neurological illness the second a girl who worries about the fate of all the missing children whose faces are stamped on the waxy mild cartons she has elaborately "catalogued," in an effort to quell her anxieties. Graver carefully delineates the inner worlds these young women have constructed in order to cope with fear or physical imprisonment; the resulting narratives are poetic meditations on pain and alienation. With "Yellow Tent," Graver's third story, however, the collection opens up to explore a wider spectrum of characters, all exquisitely conceived.

Darren, the protagonist of "Yellow Tent," is a fourteen-year-old boy,

out camping with his renegade cousin Meg, twenty and already married to an older man named Moses. Meg's decided to leave her husband - which is why the cousins are out on the banks of the Black River together, or so Darren believes until later that night, in the "low-ceilinged tent, the air hot and close," when Meg corrects his apparent misconception: "I didn't leave Moses," she said. "I'm just taking a trip."

Something sank inside him: this was not what she had said before. Before they had been fleeing, leaving, getting away from. Trips went in circles, away from home and back; he and Meg had been going in a line.

Lusciously phrased and finely tuned, "Yellow Tent" articulates every possible facet of Darren's complex feelings for Meg (desire, jealousy, embarrassment, anger). "He didn't know what she was at that moment, what he wanted her to be. He was breathless at the blurriness of it - how maybe he was sleeping and maybe he wasn't, how maybe it was a mother's hand, or a cousin's, or a sister's, or something else."

Desire is central to other stories, especially "The Body Shop" and "The Blue Hour." Their protagonist is Mrs. Haven, seventy-six years old and dying in a hospital. The object of her affection is the night nurse whom she loves "as if I were eighteen, not over seventy. As if the world had shrunk to the size of a room and all human presence had become contained in the clever body of this girl. At my age falling in love seems out of the question, but perhaps one can convince oneself of anything, given the need." The tender constriction of Mrs. Haven's affection - her compassion, need, and accompanying demands - is beautifully and thoroughly rendered. It is as if Elizabeth Graver were in possession of a magnifying lens that allows her precise access to the nuances of the human soul.

Together, these three collections, bravura debuts by gifted authors, speak to the sturdy health of the contemporary short form and to its flourishing variety in the hands of women writers.

Photo (Elizabeth Harris)

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