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## Black Lace

**Barbara Henning**
Spuyten Duyvil (Jun 28, 2001)
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A physical stimulus—a source of discomfort—often helps children with attention deficit disorder to focus their awareness. In this novel, protagonist Eileen feels the same need to reconnect with life through pain or some other sharp sensation; without it, she feels herself becoming invisible and dead. The book revolves around her struggle to stay aware within the act of living.

The author depicts a life of mundane details: housekeeping, child-rearing, existing; the story truly begins when Eileen leaves this life, testing her ability to exist without support or education. Henning takes the chance of writing without a happy ending as a safety net; she writes instead to reality, as if to support her character's claim that uneasiness reminds people that they are alive.

Eileen lives with her husband, Charlie, the man she ran off with when she was sixteen. At the beginning of the book, the marriage has already bottomed out, and Charlie has thrown Eileen from the house. She moves around the gritty urban landscape, sleeping in a parking lot, a shelter, a hotel bed covered in stained sheets, and eventually an apartment. Throughout her movement within her new life, Eileen evaluates the life she rescinded, causing the story to undulate among past, present, and future. The novel's point of view alternates between a third-person, limited view and a first-person narration; both of which keep readers close to Eileen's thoughts and responses.

This notion of pain as a crutch, a sensory nudge, is dark and well-rendered in the novel. Henning sketches her character so clearly that the notion makes sense and seems utterly reasonable in the context of Eileen's life. The book fails to offer reassurance-life does not get better-and this separates it from other books about women trapped in the institution of marriage. Sadly, perhaps inevitably, Eileen's trap simply changes form. What separates the two traps is the notion of choice, both sexual and professional.

The writing style is stark and matter-of-fact, the pacing quick. Henning's unflinching portrayal and her compassion create a memorable protagonist, neither heroine nor victim. Perhaps Eileen herself best describes her life as a woman: "I know the world better from this position, the position of a woman left wanting, the erotic and mystical world of marginality."
(August 16, 2001)

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