ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY COLLECTIONS

Curious Attractions: Essays on Fiction Writing
Debra Spark
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These nine engaging, well-turned essays on the writing of fiction reveal this about the author's working methods in the first few paragraphs: "My habit, when writing about writing, is to proceed by a sort of benign plagiarism. I take the question at hand and get on the horn with my writer friends, make them answer. Once I've found a way to embroider their quotes together, I have my essay."

While the process is undoubtedly more complicated than Spark makes it sound, this collection is proof that she has quite a few entertaining, introspective, and garrulous author buddies she can lean on in a pinch to keep herself in fresh ideas, and to mine for snappy lines on the subject before her. That said, as richly threaded with the quotations of others as these essays are, the pleasures of *Curious Attractions* primarily come from Spark's embroidery.

What people think of as the craft of writing fiction is a purely intuitive process for some authors; for others, it can be a systematic confrontation with the components of storytelling, things such as style, character, tone, and point of view. In seven of the essays, Spark gets her thoughts in sharp focus on some of these specific elements, most enjoyably in "Getting In and Getting Out: First Words on First (and Last) Words," "Stand Back" (on narrative distance), and "Speaking of Style." There are also two somewhat related pieces on magical realism, a category of fiction Spark has high admiration for: the book's title essay (a general take on the rather disappointing state of the genre in contemporary North American fiction), and "Border Guard: Fabulism in Stuart Dybek's 'Hot Ice.'" Here, Spark's prose doesn't quite recover from an excess of admiration for its subject, however deserving of admiration Dybek's story is.

Spark, who has also written *Coconuts for the Saint* and *The Ghost of Bridgetown*, has been a fellow at Yaddo and the Bunting Institute, and is a recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She also directs the Creative Writing Program at Colby College in Maine. In her acknowledgments for this volume, she explains that the essays began as lectures for students at the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in North Carolina, and while her prose style is casual and unaffected, the expectations she has of her readers and their

knowledge of fiction are aimed high.

All in all, this collection manages to be erudite and entertaining, which is not an easy combination to pull off, but Spark does it with verve and humor. *Curious Attractions* is a welcome addition to a writer's library, and a choice well worth considering as a text for any university fiction-writing course or seminar.

Ralph Culver