

Curled in the Bed of Love

Catherine Brady

University of Georgia Press (Sep 22, 2003)

\$24.95 (216pp)

978-0-8203-2545-3

Winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, this collection of stories reminds readers of the redheaded stepchild of love-longing-with its near desperation and intensity. In story after story, characters struggle to find love, to keep it, to let it go, each with their own vision of a happy ending. The author honors her characters by not giving in to their wishes; what she offers instead is the simple ways in which life-altering, and often conflicted, decisions are made, by a walk on the beach, inside a greenhouse, tending the self-inflicted wounds of a wanderer, spooning with a drunk. Brady embraces an Eskimo-like understanding that love has multiple meanings and infinite variations.

Brady teaches in the MFA Writing program at the University of San Francisco, and her first collection of stories, *The End of the Class War*, was a Book Sense 76 selection and a finalist for the Western States Book Award in fiction. The writing in the new collection is physically fit, with the pacing that such fitness would suggest. The stories are crisp, until the end, when Brady suddenly slows the pace and gives image after image to end the stories almost as tableaux.

Her eye for the moment and its significant details does not err. When a husband embraces his wife, seeking to calm her, he does not realize that he is overpowering her: "Held in his arms, she is compressed to a shape dictated by his muscles, his bones, his reach." Brady pays attention to the point of stasis, where the argument lies between two characters. Often, the interiors Brady illuminates illustrate the crumbling bridge of understanding between two people who want desperately to love each other, or to leave.

Excitingly, Brady feels in no way limited to her own gender, nationality, or sexual preference. She explores characters from all walks of life—an Iranian event planner, a couple brought close by AIDS, a twenty-three-year-old cutter, an excessively altruistic limo driver, a woman confessing on a talk show. Whatever the circumstance, the character-driven stories are taut, well told, and reminiscent of at least someone everyone knows-or has been. Her book extends what readers thought they knew about love.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (November / December 2003)

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