

Fingerless

Ian Donnell Arbuckle

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Fingerless expresses the angst that the gender-switching heroine feels as self-destructive thoughts mingle with moments of simple happiness.

Ian Donnell Arbuckle's third novel, *Fingerless*, delves into the inner thoughts of Lita (born Simon) Hernandez as she deals with the reactions of loved ones to her recent, as yet incomplete, gender change.

Fingerless reads more as character study than story, hinged on the disfigurement by brutal attackers of Lita's brother, Victor, and the disappearance of Lita's daughter, Jilly, whom s/he conceived with a high-school girlfriend before beginning the gender change. These traumatic events are a medium for examining the relationships in Lita's life. Her father, a man of few words, has no problem calling Lita his daughter or expressing love for her. Her brother is supportive, even after experiencing the hate crime that was probably provoked by his defense of his sibling. But Lita's mother is sorely perplexed by her choice—she wants to share in her granddaughter's life, but can only do so as the mother of "Aunt Lita."

Arbuckle paints Lita's story in muted hues; few conclusions are drawn. Intense and serious throughout, with only a few moments of genuine humor, the book expresses the angst that Lita feels, the self-destructive thoughts that mingle with moments of simple happiness. There are no tidy bows that can dress up Lita's situation, and the author wisely doesn't attempt to do so.

Hanging Lita's life on a thin plot line, Arbuckle creates an abundance of evocative images, though sometimes he mixes them rather untidily. In one short segment, Lita envisions choice as "two sides of a coin, ground up to a powder" followed by "knots of confusion."

The book rushes through times and settings with little to navigate by. An admirable attempt to express the inner life of someone whose outer life is chaotic and uncharted, *Fingerless* does not entirely convince us of the emotional authenticity of Lita's transformation. We are left with the sense that Lita is neither one gender nor another, not because of her physical form, but because the author could not make a total commitment to the character he has created.

Fingerless succeeds in examining the subject of gender transformation on a personal level, rather than as a set of sociological talking points. It may be appreciated by someone who has faced a comparable challenge, or who has loved someone in Lita's situation.

BARBARA BAMBERGER SCOTT (Winter 2014)

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