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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ GENERAL FICTION

Full House

Wendy Fairey
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Poker is played in a roughly similar fashion, with the same rules around the world, but the feelings of the players and the distinctiveness of each gathering's atmosphere make every game unique.

In this book of short stories, the author weaves together the lives of a group of women who have many things in common, especially their penchant for chatting over the poker table. At their monthly game, they lay out their lives as easily as the cards. Yet this is no attempt at "How to Make an American Quilt" with royal flushes and one-eyed Jacks replacing needles and thread. Fairey is adept at connecting her stories with poker as a predominant theme, but never forcing the literary device too strongly or in a way that feels unnatural. She gives her card-playing ladies room to breathe and act, and it makes the characters real.

The author holds a doctorate in English and comparative literature from Columbia University and has taught creative writing at Brooklyn College. This is her first work of fiction; her previous book, *One of the Family*, is a memoir of growing up in Hollywood as the daughter of a gossip columnist.

By creating a wealth of stories rather than fitting the book's events into a novel, Fairey quietly simulates a monthly game, in which there are gaps of time and tumultuous happenings in those weeks between five-card stud. And jaunts there are, because these women's knowledge of life is as deep and interesting as their conversation.

The dominant character, Jenny, a bright, sparkling creation, has such fascinating flaws that it's difficult to believe that she is fictional. In one tale, she's forced out of her regular poker game and finds herself lured to another, one that claims Bella Abzug as its guardian angel. Earlier, she spends some memorable weeks awakening to her bisexuality, and having to confront her husband's infidelity.

Although Fairey excels at taking on these grand life moments, it's in the smaller details that her artistry is most evident. In the story, "Over the Hill," Jenny and a friend decide to take a bike tour through the French countryside. Anyone who has ever traveled with a good friend, only to find out how incompatible they really are when put to the test, will appreciate the characters' deepening frustration with each other. In a particularly venomous bit of inner monologue, Jenny thinks, "I was angry at her and grew to dislike her. Her jokes irritated. Her presence seemed to occupy all the space in our shared bedroom… . And my heart hardened against her, to a consistency thicker than jam."

Unlike Jenny's feelings toward her maddening friend, it's difficult not to grow more and more fond of the card-playing main character after her tales of heartbreak, contemplation, triumph, and most deliciously, a series of winning poker hands. (January

ELIZABETH MILLARD (January / February 2004)

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