

Pushed to Shore

Kate Gadbow

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Much is made of the consequences of the Vietnam War, politically and emotionally. This debut novel is a portrait of one woman who protested the war and now seeks to help its refugees. The first-person narrator, Janet Hunter, is a Missoula, Montana high school teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) in 1983. Her students are Vietnamese and Hmong refugees, children of soldiers and villagers, who have been lucky enough to receive asylum in the United States, even though that asylum plops them into a vastly different culture with bewildering rules.

One student is arrested for hunting deer out of season. Another is teased because he always wears a baseball cap to cover the scars on his scalp inflicted by pirates as he escaped the war, one of thousands of boat people. American boys ogle and tease the Hmong girls in the hallways. Janet, a thirty-six year-old former hippie, worries about her students, not just because of the challenges they face in America, but because of their cultural roots, which are stretched to near-breaking.

In the first chapters, the story seems to belong to the students, as Janet reports on their development, but as the novel progresses, the reader realizes that this is Janet's story as well. Divorced, "middle aged," and lonely, she finds romance with Taylor, an environmental lawyer. In the thrall of a new relationship, she is happy. Yet this man, a recently divorced father of an angry thirteen-year-old boy, is not the answer to Janet's dissatisfaction with her life.

Taylor is kind and safe, yet there is a darkness in other men, including MacLaughlin, a Vietnam veteran, and Vihn, one of her Vietnamese students, that attracts Janet. "It seems so trite to call it sin, although that's probably what sin is. Not a turning away from God ... but a turning away from yourself, from everything that provides order and meaning and light in your life." Janet's own heart of darkness is what she must face in order to live in a changing world.

The author, who was the 2001 winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction, has written an unexpected page-turner. The narrative begins slowly with an introduction to all of Janet's students; one longs to be thrust into the character's personal story more quickly. As Gadbow moves in that direction, however, the reader understands that as Janet helps her resilient students adjust to their new world, she also is learning to know herself, and it's easy to root for her.

OLIVIA BOLER (March / April 2003)

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