ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Reel to Real
Lidia Yuknavitch
Fiction Collective 2
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Reading this book is like stumbling into a dark theater where an indie film that barely slipped by with an R rating is playing, half over, on the screen. Think David Lynch meets Joe Esterhaus, only they're women and they're shooting with handheld cameras.

The material is raunchy, disorienting, infuriating, and suffused with moments so genuine the reader has to look away, but can't stay away. The author's short stories use the cinematic lens as a motif. The device by no means gives the stories all the same form. They are told in dialogue, in voiceover, framed as scenes in a movie, or reduced to representations of elements of filmmaking.

What really holds the collection together are the common themes of sex, violence (emotional and physical), alienation, sex, and more sex. It is mostly disturbing sex-exploitative, sadomasochistic, incestuous.

Yet Yuknavitch is also capable of surprisingly poignant, even tender moments, as in this passage from the story, "Signification": "Later, after the talking has turned back into their mouths on one another's flesh, as he is holding her cradled in his arms, he looks down into her face so near sleep and love or death and accidentally stumbles upon a sentence that is true enough-that her sadness is equaled in intensity only by her ability to feel joy. She thinks it takes the one to feel the other."

This story, the strongest in the collection, is an excruciatingly on-target portrayal of a couple simultaneously grasping for closeness and inflicting emotional cruelty on one another. Though the relationship is horribly flawed, the meager affection that exists lifts the piece above the nihilism that runs through many of the stories.

"If Patti Smith Was Jesus Maybe They Could Make a Movie Outta Her Life," reads like the screed of a terminally ticked off teen-ager. That's clearly the effect Yuknavitch had in mind, but it grows tiresome long before the story ends.

Yuknavitch is the author of two other short story collections-Her Other Mouths and Liberty's Excess-and a book of criticism, Allegories of Violence. She teaches writing and

literature in Oregon.

Her latest collection is not for everyone-it may not be for most people. Readers willing to mine the raw, angry terrain, though, will find gems of insight and even poetry.

Karen Holt