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Slut Lullabies

Gina Frangello
Emergency Press (June 2010)
Softcover $15.00 (196pp)
978-0-9753623-7-2

Slut Lullabies is not a book that soothes; these stories of wreckage and turmoil will not sing the mind to rest. Rather, Gina Frangello jolts readers awake. She takes on weighty contemporary topics—mental illness, domestic violence, suicide, and poverty. Issues of identity are at the forefront of this book. Class, race, gender, sexual preference, and ability are all explored through a diverse cast of characters and Frangello's wry voice.

The author applies a critical mind to thoroughly political issues. But this is not didactic reading. Today's most controversial topics are embodied in this collection, breathed in words: "Would she ask then, as he has asked himself a million times: *If you are willing to incur the wrath of God for your homosexuality, shouldn't it be for something more?*"

Sex figures prominently in this book, in many forms—adultery; rape; homosexuality; group sex; seduction; sex as spectacle, as political statement, as self definition, as means of survival. The reader may feel like a voyeur, so intimate are Frangello's portrayals.

Frangello zooms in on shrouded lives, unveiling them felicitously. She is a writer of studied technique, a master of the well-placed line, a conjurer who can render a character with only a name ("'Two starches?' exclaimed Elaine Please, as though it must be a mistake"), and an aficionada of her characters' signature voices. Each character employs a rhetoric that is his or her own. What's more, Frangello expertly applies that which can't be said onto the page.

The inadequacies and tricks of language is a theme of this book and is especially central in "Attila the There," a masterpiece story. It takes place in Amsterdam, a setting which is erected in sharp relief. The American protagonist toils to achieve insider status and, in a language course, learns "hun" in Dutch means "there." In the wake of his own violent past, he remarks "how easily language could be recast, violence becoming merely the absurd." The act of translation, or the "reinvention of meaning," is nuanced in this story—unforgettably so.

This is Frangello's second release, following her much-praised debut novel, *My Sister's Continent*. Frangello's penetrating mind and humor make her a captivating storyteller. To pick up this rare book is to remain with it. Cheeky and deeply felt, these present-day stories will outlast us.

JANELLE ADSIT (April 15, 2010)

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