

Small Acts of Sex and Electricity

Lise Haines

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Conventional wisdom has it that college-educated women account for the single largest segment of the book-buying market, with privileged thirty-somethings (single, married, or married-with-children) at the heart of this demographic: good news for this accomplished novel, focused as it is on that very group.

Mattie, the narrator, is an appraiser for a Chicago auction house, with a boyfriend of fairly long standing but no plans for settling down, partly because she still carries a torch for her friend Jane's husband Mike, whom they first met in college and with whom Jane now has two daughters, one four and the other fourteen. All five have gathered at the Santa Barbara beachfront house of Jane's late grandmother Franny, to catalogue and liquidate her considerable estate.

As girls, each woman suffered some degree of painful neglect, from the self-absorbed flakiness of Mattie's parents to Jane's father's suicide and her mother's subsequent breakdown. Franny, a well-heeled widow, provided the closest thing to stability in either's life—and although she's been dead for six months, her outsized personality still dominates *small acts of sex and electricity*, in which she is really the only grown-up presence.

The book opens with Mattie climbing into Mike's bed to explain that Jane has just left him, driving off in Franny's beloved Jaguar after bequeathing her husband and family to her childhood friend. Or so Jane says, anyway. How Mattie, Mike, and the two youngsters react forms the main plotline ... and whether readers react with sympathy or exasperation may vary. Where some will see understandable, perhaps even inevitable angst and ambivalence, others will find only arrested development.

Whatever one may think of her protagonists, however, there's no doubt that this author is a fine writer. Currently on leave from her post as Writer in Residence at Emerson College in Boston while she serves as the Briggs-Copeland Lecturer at Harvard, she writes with real authority and the offhanded precision of a poet (which she is, with one collection to her credit already, as well as a previous novel, *In My Sister's Country*). She has a keen ear for the cadences of dialogue; a sharp, surprising sense of humor; and a skillful way of interweaving past and present to trace not just the events of a few weeks but also three decades of friendship and four generations of family, real and surrogate alike.

To have a larger-than-life character like Franny for a grandmother can't have been easy, and if anything, in sainted memory she sets an even higher standard. It is her forceful spirit against which the others measure themselves—and against which readers will measure them, too. But if Mattie, Mike, and Jane still have a long way to go as the book closes, Haines leaves room for hope that Franny's generous legacy may live on.

PEYTON MOSS (December 8, 2006)

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