

The Delinquent Virgin

Laura Kalpakian

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The art of story telling is alive and well in this intriguing collection of tales by Kalpakian. *The Delinquent Virgin* is a pleasant potpourri of humor, drama and unexpected twists. Although several stories are set in the fictional town of St. Elmo, California—a setting that Kalpakian has used for years—these unrelated offerings live up to the subtitle “Wayward Pieces.”

The anthology opens with “Lavee, Lagair, Lamore, Lamaïrd.” Having been tutored in French by her extremely proper governess, Miss Savage, spinster Mabel Judd goes to France to do her part in the war effort by working as a translator for the Allies. She soon, however, loses her position when it is discovered that the seemingly perfect teacher had taught Mabel a vocabulary largely comprised of swear words. Just two pages in length, “How Maxwell Perkins Learned to Edit” is an amusing look at how great literature can be compared to great salsa. “It must evoke a gut reaction, it must take your breath away, it must make your eyes water, you must weep and laugh, maybe at the same moment.”

The title story, “The Delinquent Virgin,” is an unusually inspiring tale of forgiveness. The Reverend Hamilton Ready finds that statues of the Holy Family are repeatedly stolen from St. Elmo Episcopal’s Nativity scene. The thieves return the statues, but not to the church. Instead, the sacred figures are found on the steps of the police station, at the county courthouse, the local hospital and at the town’s “madhouse.” The Reverend Ready forgives the thieves when it occurs to him that the holy icons have received much more notice in these non-typical settings than at the church.

The final story, “Change at Empoli,” relates the story of Corinne Mackenzie, Director of the Institute for Italian Art. Director Mackenzie becomes fed up with her American students when she hears herself being referred to as “the old witch.” In an act of childish rebellion, one of the students defecates on the floor outside of her office. Corinne responds with a dramatic gesture. She immediately departs on a train for Pisa, Italy. Her actions were prompted by something her dear friend Max had told her thirty years ago, “There are moments in life when all that is left to you is gesture. You perform that gesture because without it, you are merely stranded and pathetic.” Changing trains at Empoli, Corinne spends her two-hour delay reflecting on her life and her relationship with Max.

Several other thought-provoking and inventive stories round out this collection by Kalpakian, described by some critics as one of the “most unheralded, brightest talents” in the country. The author has published several novels and short story collections, novellas, short stories, essays and interviews for magazines and newspapers.

JILL R. HUGHES (November / December 1999)

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