

The Home Jar: Stories

Nancy Zafris

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Sensuous prose teases out peculiarities in ostensibly conventional host of characters.

"Life itself ... just prolong[s] the inevitable" reflects a character in Flannery O'Connor Award recipient Nancy Zafris's (*The People I Know*, 2009) latest collection of stories, a darkly luminescent compilation which succeeds in inverting the notion that human lives follow ordinary paths. Such outwardly macabre statements are at home in the mouths of her eclectic characters, many of whom nevertheless choose vivacity over despondence.

Outwardly, Zafris's characters are prosaic folks, living in or traveling through uncelebrated backwaters, employed without much distinction. There are farmers, graduate students, and flight attendants amongst them, but the author chips away at these veneers to afford readers a glimpse of the teeming depths beneath their surfaces.

In the title story, an African immigrant withstands a hotel porter's standard tribulations, his outward cheer fed by the knowledge that the cash he receives from querulous guests flows straight to a cache intended for his beloved back home. "Furgus Welcomes You" follows a housewife as the confines of her small Midwestern town become too unbearable, its boundaries tightening around her until she's forced to take action. In "Stealing the Llama Farm," the act through which the protagonist moves to declare his love is both gruesome and final. "Prix Fixe" focuses on a once celebrated chef now relegated to an unimpressive hotel kitchen, and in "Digging the Hole," cantankerous Jarmilla returns to the site where, years ago, a career spent secreting unwanted folks away enabled her to make an atrocious, life-altering decision.

While these pages will prompt some to draw comparisons—to Flannery O'Connor via the grotesque, or to William Trevor, owing to frequent melancholia—Zafris's pages possess a particular dynamism which resists similitude. Readers will move from tale to tale with undiminished fascination as Zafris breathes life into her ostensibly conventional host of characters, her sensuous prose teasing out their peculiarities even as it illuminates locales which the eye might otherwise pass over. Phrases such as "the forest panted out its beefy halitosis" and "she was touching living death, and the feel of it was bituminous, hard and soft" are both chilling and evocative, and are well-complimented by eerie allusions elsewhere. "The sun faces a sad journey over this country," comments a character in "White's Lake," one of many innocuous phrases which may, in their context, send readers diving under the covers.

A complex collection, at turns unsettling, provocative, and invigorating—and sometimes, all at once—*The Home Jar* resonates throughout. It's an unerringly veracious offering from a writer of impressive skill.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Summer 2013)

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