ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

The Miller Masks: A Novel in Stories
Neil D. Isaacs
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The Millers of these twenty tales belong to Jesse Miller, fiftyish, Jewish, husband, adulterer, academic, writer, son and lover, a sardonic, voluble witness to his own life. Told in brief, interconnected stories, the novel traces Jesse's life from his boyhood's secret life as a famous basketball player in New Haven to his merciless college lecture on the phenomenon of media sports celebrity in Washington, D.C.

Given the author's many publications, where case studies on Eudora Welty and Grace Paley alternate with histories of professional sports, his narrative voice fits like second skin. Isaacs is both a professor of English at the University of Maryland as well as a family therapist, and yarn spinning comes naturally to his alter ego Jesse. Jesse's subject is often women, those he is about to seduce, has seduced or (most memorably) the hefty marriage counselor he must trounce in a tennis game of mixed doubles. Like a male Scheherazade, he offers irresistible story hooks to his women, who act like soft (and sometimes sharp) pillows, amorous auditors to his nightly ruminations.

The first story, "Dancer," lovingly catches the tone of a rueful adult watching his younger self rehearse his own sports greatness to come. Soon he's a graduate school Romeo, polishing up his self-deprecating Woody Allen banter for the English Department's brightest star. Alas, she eludes him by using bigger Freudian words. But here, as in his more autumnal mood of spreading his father's cremated remains, there is little recognizable immediacy in his women. It would have been nice, for example, to see a scene of his ex-wife's adulterous lying played out; instead, Jesse brilliantly dictates his own brief for his new divorce lawyer, trying and sentencing her in absentia.

The Miller persona (with an adult habit of using too much therapy shorthand to explain his motives) somehow eclipses the other characters. Even the last story, a shrewd one-two punch against sportscasters? shallowness in an age of media-hype, is such a polemic that it scarcely tries to masquerade as fiction. Isaacs? Miller has proven that he has earned more than enough credit in history, psychology and English to graduate to a more meditative format that will allow

a larger range of rounded characters to have their say.

Leeta Taylor