

Threats

Amelia Gray

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In her first novel, Amelia Gray charts a man's unraveling following the mysterious death of his wife. But such a simple description leaves out all the fantastic turns Gray has in store for her readers. One day David's wife, Franny, falls sick. She begins vomiting blood. The couple sits on their front stairs together for three days. Police and paramedics arrive to find David alive, Franny dead. This bizarre opening, with its touching fairy tale quality, serves as a great introduction to a surreal novel.

David proves to be anything but a reliable witness when questioned by the local police. Paralyzed with unfounded fears and living as a shut-in after a lawsuit ruined his career as a dentist, David's already tenuous grip on reality begins to slip further. Soon after his wife dies, he starts receiving the sinister threats that give the novel its title (and fans will recognize from Gray's live readings), which he finds hidden around his home. "TRY TO KISS ME," reads a message David finds in one of Franny's old aprons, "SEE WHAT HAPPENS TO YOUR LIPS." Another threat, printed over an old receipt, states, "I WILL LOCK YOU IN A ROOM MUCH LIKE YOUR OWN UNTIL IT BEGINS TO FILL WITH WATER." In his attempt to unravel this mystery, David discovers potential suspects everywhere, from the women at the salon where Franny worked to strangers at the Laundromat, people standing outside his home, and others passing by in the street.

Those familiar with Gray's shorter work will find *Threats* a nice elaboration in the style of the endearing and bizarre stories in her collection *Museum of the Weird*. *Threats* follows a dream-logic reminiscent of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, and, like similar fiction, can at times suffer from the same shortcomings. Surreal fiction is hard to maintain for an entire book, and the nonsensical randomness—doubles, potential ghosts, grotesque strangers, a hornet-loving therapist living secretly inside the protagonist's garage—may wear thin for those expecting a traditional narrative. But Gray finds a variety of inventive ways to avoid this, including experiments in form, non-linear story lines, and startlingly effective shifts in point of view. The chapters composed entirely of voice-mail messages are a perfect example: Gray builds significance through repetition by contrasting the messages saved with those deleted, and these short interludes become touchstones for David's loss.

While waiting for the bus, one of the many vivid background characters in *Threats* complains to David that, "Kids these days have no concept of jazz." Amelia Gray knows jazz, and *Threats* is proof. With its surreal turns, lyrical prose, and formal experiments, *Threats* is an exciting follow-up to Gray's excellent shorter works.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (February 21, 2012)

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