General

Transgressions
Sallie Bingham
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As a person reaches the late middle years of life, the push and pull of personal connections inform the decisions she makes, decisions that will change the course of her remaining years. In the author's third short story collection, unconditional love is juxtaposed with the crossing of societal boundariesÃ'of transgression. Each of the eleven stories is a delicate portrait of individuals who make choicesÃ'particularly in regard to their relationshipsÃ'that reveal their perhaps unspoken fears about getting older and being alone.

In "Apricots," the opening story, Caroline, a sixty-three-year-old professor living alone, asks one of her students, a young man named Charles, to help her make jam from the fruit of her apricot tree. She is drawn to him, and although their relationship could remain that of teacher and student, Charles uses the chance of being alone with Caroline to chastise her for not caring enough about her students to even learn their names correctly. Charles then seduces her, but instead of feeling smug, as some older women who have attracted a younger man might, Caroline is both dismayed and exhilaratedÃ'the clock has stopped ticking, and she acknowledges that her life is unraveling.

The theme of unraveling without completely falling apart is apparent throughout the collection. In "The One True Place," a loving, secure relationship that has spanned a decade for two men is quietly torn asunder when they take in a younger man. The title character of "Rat" finds herself loving a man so much that her attentive care results in his eventual death from a long, undiagnosed illness. In "The Big Bed," a sixty-four-year-old woman wants to fulfill her lover's every fantasyÃ'even if it means inviting another woman into their bed.

In addition to her two previous short story collections, Bingham has published four novels and a memoir, and her stories have appeared in numerous publications, including The Atlantic Monthly and The Greensboro Review. She was Book Editor for The Courier-Journal in Louisville and has been a director of the National Book Critics Circle.

Her stories in Transgressions end predictablyÃ’the characters make decisions about their relationships, and perhaps learn something about themselves. Yet, the predictability works: a short story’s ending should be inevitable, but surprising. Bingham achieves this with her clear, quiet prose, and the reader feels both hollowed out and yet invaded by something considerableÃ’just as the characters feel.

Olivia Boler