

Troglodyte

Tracy DeBrincat

Elixir Press (Jan 1, 2014)

Softcover \$19.00 (200pp)

978-1-932418-48-4

Reinventing oneself becomes an imaginative feat in these arresting short stories.

Tracy DeBrincat returns via her third book with portraits of distressed youth who seek change through hyperbolic, imaginative, or risky feats, and women in apparently stable relationships who experience unspoken doubts. With an accomplished eye for interior details, the author explores tensions in lower-income households, among other settings, tempering the darkness in many situations with literary, musical, and religious outlets that offer characters temporary refuge. Sometimes disconcerting longings unfold into compassionate renderings of slowly accumulated griefs.

Several stories feature the theme of reinvention. In “Badass,” a middle-schooler, through the prompting of a questionable friend, realizes that “to know what was right and yet to do what was wrong” brought exhilarating discomfort. DeBrincat captures some of the more difficult facets of adolescence with admirable skill, guiding her protagonist through a volatile mix of sexual curiosity and empathy toward the class delinquent. In the titular “Troglodyte,” a runaway similarly tests personal boundaries and “tries on” possible selves, this time with greater deliberation.

This theme peaks in the macabre selection “Help Me Find My Killer,” which draws from a common type found in psychological thrillers: the obsessive roommate who plots murder and impersonates her object of desire. Despite the salacious framework, DeBrincat creates a richer subtext: she expands on the character by recounting her longstanding inability to escape from a servility she confused with loyalty.

Stories with stronger female characters include “Glossolalia.” Here, Dora—a young girl who spies on neighbors while enduring an illness that leaves her housebound—discovers her mother’s lover dallying with another woman. In an unexpected turn, DeBrincat allows Dora to die and continue to narrate from the afterlife. Rather than seeming contrived, however, the dramatic choice becomes an arresting way to influence Dora’s remaining family members.

More delicately wrought stories take a subtler course and quieter pitch, magnifying small insecurities. In “Call It a Hat,” a woman at the symphony dreads what she believes will be an impending proposal. The tidy, predictable “lifetime of pleasant and easy” that is certain to follow inspires her to imagine an alternative, which turns humorous with its minutiae. In “Gneiss,” DeBrincat displays a talent for atmospheric kitsch as she relays the tale of a couple at momentary odds while traveling for a wedding.

These represent but a sampling of the range of the stories in *Troglodyte*. The collection gathers eclectic voices threaded by deep-seated vulnerabilities, with a flair for uncovering emotional truths amid stifling surroundings. An unusual, satisfying read.

KAREN RIGBY (Spring 2014)

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