

# SHORT NOVELS

*kleberry Finn* answers with her own version, and other brief takes. *By Renee Bergland*

's answer to Huck's ... the woman Jim, escaped

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's *Enchant-* 1 by John Ca-orms shifting ay places. A

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Body and Soul

arely filtered s her fascina-

tion with childhood things: Barbie's breasts, horseback riding, the fear of being spanked, a séance for a dead turtle, and the sublime taste of pasta, soufflé and ice cream mixed together.

She also gestures toward the complicated political context of Paris in the 1960s that, childlike, she experiences without understanding. Toward the end, when the girl (who is never named) and her sister are caught in the leftist student demonstrations of May 1968, their father drags them up and over the roofs of stopped cars, with strangers screaming while Simone de Beauvoir's voice booms out across the crowd. Safe at home, the girl asks her father if he has lived according to de Beauvoir's ideals. He answers in a "vague, pensive voice": "Ah ... I'm not sure. Yes, probably yes ... At any rate, I've never felt that I was living someone else's life." *Enchantments* looks back at the fairy-tale world that its narrator lived in — a world changed forever by a tragedy that struck not long after the riots — and celebrates the bittersweet wonder of having grown up in her own family.

Quietly elegiac, *Enchantments* is Linda Ferri's first novel; she co-authored the screenplay for "The Son's Room," which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2001. Like the film, the book centers on the psychological impact of death in the family, and Ferri handles the subject sure-handedly and gracefully.

**The Running Man**

Damon Galgut's *The Quarry* (Grove Atlantic; paperback, \$12) is a mixed bag: minimalist and overworked, a simple chase narrative and a complicated language game. The novel opens with an intensely physical description of a fugitive hurrying through the grasslands of South Africa, drinking grit-filled water from a discarded bottle, washing in a cold stream under a glaring sun. We never learn who is after him, or why. He is simply "the quarry" of an unexplained chase. The plot (and the language game) gets complicated when he murders a minister who is on his way to a new job, dumps the body in an abandoned quarry and assumes the minister's identity. Soon after, a young man who has been growing marijuana at the quarry breaks into the minister's car. The petty theft links this almost-innocent bystander to the murder, and he, in turn, becomes the quarry of another man-hunt.

Sometimes minimalism can be over the top. Galgut's writing is so relentlessly simple that it becomes ridiculously complicated, the work of a young writer a little bit dazzled by his own powers. And yet Galgut is a dazzlingly intelligent writer. Every word is sharp, precise, loaded with value — often overloaded. When he tells us that the fugitive "knew that in his blue and spectral fugue of movement and sleep he was quickly drawing near to the uttermost edge of things," his words are so weighted with abstract meaning that they are nearly indecipherable. With its odd combination of concrete nouns and abstract intensity, the novel forces readers to work too hard. But although it is difficult, it is an exciting book; readers may find themselves caught up in the fugue of language, abstraction, and physical fear.

Written 10 years ago, *The Quarry* is being released now for the first time in the United States. Galgut has had great success with a more recent book, *The Good Doctor*, a finalist for the 2003 Man Booker Prize and winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the African region. By the time he wrote *The Good Doctor*, he had learned to temper his own brilliance; this early novel exemplifies the perils (and, at times, the intoxicating pleasures) of unadulterated literary ambition.

**Body and Soul**

*Milk*, by Darcey Steinke (Bloomsbury, \$17.95), is about sex and God, and appropriately enough starts at Christmas with a young woman named Mary clutching a baby to her breast. But

this is no virginal Mary — to the contrary, she is a fully sexual being, alive to the erotic pleasures and frustrations of motherhood. Because her husband is not really interested in having sex with a mother, Mary leaves him. She moves across New York to share a rectory with Walter, an old friend from college who is a Catholic priest in mourning for his male lover. Soon, she will find some sexual comfort in the arms of John, a disaffected monk. Mary, Walter and John are all searching for God, love and sexual fulfillment, but all are puzzled about how these very different searches fit together. At one point, Walter, the priest, describes sex as "holy no matter how sleazy the circumstances, as it was the sensation beyond the reach of God," but he is not really convinced by this for long.



Unfortunately, the novel itself is not wholly convincing either. Steinke writes some beautifully mystical descriptions of sexual encounters, and the conjunction of sex and the spirit, bodies and souls, is fascinating. But the Mary/Walter/John trinity is also coldly schematic. In spite of Steinke's beautiful prose, this short novel seems skimpy rather than spare; its complicated ideas are evoked but not fully explored. *Milk* offers the beginning of a fascinating novel, but it stops short of delivering on that promise.

**Ashes to Ashes**

Johan Sletten, the main character of Linn Ullmann's *Grace* (Knopf, \$20; translated from the Norwegian by Barbara Haveland), is not the hero of his own tale. He is a journalist, but not the sort whose stories get noticed. He has botched most things, including his unpleasant first marriage, his disastrous relationship with his pompous, stupid son, and his terrible decision to plagiarize a story and end his career in quiet disgrace. His second marriage is the single grace note in an otherwise starkly ordinary life. He adores his wife, Mai, a doctor 17 years younger than he is, and, miraculously, she loves him. Looking back on his life, he realizes that "if he shut his eyes, and worked his way inside to the part of him that continued to burn, he could find the rapture that Mai's face awakened in him, not only when they first fell in love, but to this day. It was like discovering a clearing in the forest where wild strawberries grew."

**Ashes to Ashes**

When Johan learns that he is dying, he asks Mai to assist his suicide because he wants to do one thing with dignity in his otherwise undignified life. At first she refuses, but he continues to plead with her until, after months of resisting, Mai agrees that when it gets really bad, she will kill him. As she makes the promise, Johan sees a look of relief on her face that is hard to forgive. From then on, we are in a world of ambiguity and regret.



*Grace* treats the subject of assisted suicide with sorrowful ambivalence and astonishing grace. Rather than a polemical argument, the novel offers powerful affirmation of the haunting beauty of ordinary human life and death. After Johan's funeral, Ullman writes, "Now that all this is said and done, it might seem as if Johan was the only one who knew he had an inner flame, a quietly resounding yes." But Ullman, a gifted writer, succeeds in permeating her entire novel with Johan's quietly resounding yes. ■

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