

REVIEWS OF BONNIE JO CAMPBELL'S *WOMEN & OTHER ANIMALS*

The 16 stories in this bold and eloquent debut collection feature women from Michigan's Lower Peninsula who bite, claw, flee from danger and follow their instincts, revealing their untamed inner selves. In "Circus Matinee," an escaped tiger stalks Big Joanie as she distributes snow cones to a circus audience. Several stories juxtapose the beautiful and the grotesque. In one, a local beauty contemplates a future with "The Smallest Man in the World"; in "Eating Aunt Victoria," a teenage girl and her brother come to terms with their late mother's gruff lesbian lover; in "The Perfect Lawn," an adolescent boy obsessed with a cheerleader also finds room in his fantasies to include her alcoholic, desperate mother. Campbell portrays misfits in middle America's economic and social fringe with subtle irony, rich imagery and loving familiarity, describing domestic worlds where Martha Stewart would fear to tread. In "Bringing Home the Bones," a Holocaust survivor and farmer's widow scalds herself badly while canning beans, and ends up losing her leg, the accident causing her to rekindle her relationship with her two daughters. Campbell's protagonists are hard on themselves, but sympathy is often forthcoming from unexpected sources. The young protagonist of "The Fishing Dog" depends on the men she meets to care for her, and it is her good fortune to fall in with a gentle, patient fellow who welcomes her to his riverside fishing shack. In another tale, a junior high school girl learns to negotiate her new pride, vulnerability and exhibitionism, all rapidly developing alongside her voluptuous body. Campbell's determined, eccentric, painfully and beautifully human heroines, many of them young or poor, are touching even as they consistently remind the reader of their unpredictable, durable ferocity. (Nov.)

Publisher's Weekly, 10/4/99

Many of the female characters in *WOMEN AND OTHER ANIMALS: Stories* (University of Massachusetts, \$25), Bonnie Jo Campbell's ambitious collection of short stories, are desperately hungry for love or freedom - or just a good meal. In "Eating Aunt Victoria," a hugely obese woman keeps her food padlocked from her dead lover's adult live-in children and carries "a purse the size of a roast beef." In "The Perfect Lawn," a young man obsessed by a former classmate is seduced by her alcoholic mother, whose body "threatened to devour not just his personal part, but all the rest of him too." These women live trapped in their run-down farms and cabins as if, as the mother in "Sleeping Sickness" puts it, they're in jail. The women long to escape their shabby dwellings, to ease or animate their impoverished lives. Instead, they drink, eat or smoke too much and are either frantically or desultorily promiscuous. The men they know are predators: absent, indifferent or casually brutal. When a man does behave kindly, as Michael does to Gwen in "The Fishing Dog," his unexpected decency cannot dispel her animal wariness. In "Gorilla Girl," a 17-year-old girl finds an outlet for her ferocity by playing a gorilla in a sideshow. "Occasionally," she says, "a woman rattles with laughter or else sobs in the dark - she has recognized, in my form, the monster of her own wasted strength." At another point, she speaks of a pit bull that seems "to embody the turbulence of my own corporeality." It's a wonderful story, despite the incongruity of a girl who growls for a living and snacks on grasshoppers addressing the reader so loftily. But there are only a few such lapses in these hard-hitting stories, which are bitter but sweetened with humor.

Janet Kaye, New York Times Review of Books, 1/9/00

Campbell's stories come roaring across rural Michigan with the speed and fury of an unexpected train. Fresh and larger-than-life, each features a profoundly independent, if not feral, female character who possesses extreme physical strength and resilient emotional powers. In "The Fishing Dog," a man tells an 18-year-old woman living alone in a riverside cabin with no modern amenities that it seems as though she's been raised by wolves. In "Gorilla Girl," Campbell's heroine is possessed by an almost inhuman wildness. She eats insects, beats up a classmate, forces sharp objects through her skin, and finally finds a haven in a freak show. Elsewhere, a seventh-grader proudly displays her shapely breasts like trophies, wreaking havoc at home and at school. Lonely women eat, smoke, and sleep too much, struggling to suppress far more outrageous appetites, while their daughters try to protect them even as they plot their escape. Campbell is a poet of survival, lust, and freedom, and the call of her powerful stories resonates long after their pages have been turned.

Donna Seaman, Booklist, 11/15/99

What a well-named book. Bonnie Jo Campbell's debut, winner of the 1998 Associated Writing Program Award for Short Fiction, is a truly bizarre experience frequently revealing the magical ability of writing to create worlds within worlds.

Campbell is merciless with her downtrodden characters, putting them through barely imaginable indignities. Though these people could be anywhere in rural America, Campbell chooses to write of Podunk, Michigan. Like Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger* and

Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Women and Other Animals seems odd and disjointed at first, but becomes effective when allowed to sink in; approach it as if you were reading the Zen of sick humor and unpleasant human odors.

The stories are unrelated, but eventually emerge as a sort of inbred family tree. Campbell's specialty is her interesting laundry lists of details (comical and symbolic) and her ability to humanize freaks, much as Katherine Dunn does. Many of the stories include circuses or carnivals as well as, of course, women and animals. Frequently the women are animals. The men are worse. It is rare to find a writer so willing to shed her inhibitions and dive into the literary cesspool more recently occupied by such authors as Harry Crews, Cormac McCarthy, and Annie Proulx; this primordial ooze having flowed from Flannery O'Connor.

Campbell provides us with little action. Her stories are exquisite snapshots of the weird and damaged. As the book goes on, it becomes more and more compelling. "Gorilla Girl" is an unbridled first-person narrative from the point of view of a teenage sociopath. Such is the power of Campbell's writing that we reluctantly envy the girl's lack of restraint. "Eating Aunt Victoria" is filled with morbid irony. Its NC-17 descriptions are filled with the sap of life, fluids both vital and disgusting. Budding sexuality is treated as hormonal, not romantic.

"The Fishing Dog" is terrific, as is "The Perfect Lawn," creepy, fascinating, and even touching (in all of its senses). In "Sleeping Sickness," a woman dumps her dead lover's ashes "as though she expected him to grow again next year."

Let Women and Other Animals work its magic. Though you'll most certainly want to take a shower after reading this book, this is a great and rare opportunity to have your moral foundations shaken to the quick by literature.

Michael Salkind, The Bloomsbury Review, May/June 2000

In Women and Other Animals, a bold debut of energetic short stories by Bonnie Jo Campbell, we are swept away into the secret thoughts of various Michigan creatures, both fantastic and everyday. The collection of sixteen stories, winner of the 1998 Associated Writing Programs' Award Series in Short Fiction, encompasses a lyrical journey into the magic and mystery of place, the rivers and townships of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Here strong men and women confront escaped circus gorillas and train wrecks, skin catfish and raise calves, and fight - for their lives, for love, and for the understanding to help them survive both.

Often times we feel displaced in a strange new world, but the richly imaginative world of Campbell's stories pulls us in and makes her landscapes ours, instantly familiar, as women, as humans. The characters who inhabit these landscapes are odd, too, but never treated as freakish. Instead their humanity and dignity shine through, as in the protagonist of "The Smallest Man in the World," a beautiful woman who finds a connection between her own beauty and the smallness of a circus performer:

"I do not like to see my own face, because, despite my make-up, I look sad - sometimes as sad as that rouged old woman slumped over the bar opposite me. When I fix my face in the morning, it sometimes occurs to me to make myself up as a clown by lipsticking a massive smile on my face. Or exaggerating the sadness by painting a frown and a few shiny tears."

Later in the same story, this connection is pushed further when the protagonist watches the circus performer run down the bar toward her and claims that if the smallest man in the world is "brave enough to jump, I will catch him."

In "Gorilla Girl," the protagonist finds her only release from pent-up anger is the transformative power of violence. She experiments with athletics, then with men, but discovers that each leaves her only with a hunger for an unknown more. The release she searches for is eventually found, in part, by performing in a circus side-show act where

"the air becomes crisp, and every person in the tent feels connected to my Middle West gorilla, my mad-amorous crusher of households, my rampager of tidy rose gardens. Occasionally a woman rattles with laughter or else sobs in the dark - she has recognized, in my form, the monster of her own wasted strength."

Campbell's vision of place, however, includes more than these fantastic circus acts and strange locales. "Bringing Home the Bones" plays out in the farmlands of Michigan, where a mother struggles for a connection with her estranged daughters who do not understand her need to grow her own vegetables and kill her own chickens. It takes an unordinary event in these lives - the amputation of the mother's leg - to bring the women together. In the funny "The Sudden Physical Development of Debra Dupuis," the high school-aged Debra dreams of the healing powers of her developing breasts, "a meal for a hungry belly, a Christmas gift for an

orphan, medicine for the wounded," until an unexpected turn-of-events proves the more serious affects her budding sexuality has on those around her. In "Taking Care of the O'Learys," a wife and mother searches for her own place in a house too big and a family too crazy.

It is this combination of the strong sense of place and the ability to see such dignity in misfits which brings to mind Eudora Welty and the tradition of Southern writers who show us the pluralities of lives. Yet Campbell's stories push beyond these comparisons through her own original characters, as rich and varied as the world they inhabit. It is a promising collection from a strong new voice, one we are sure to hear more from in the near future. The only question is what she will turn her gaze to next."

Katherine Perry, So To Speak, Spring/Summer 2000

THE TERRAIN BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

On the cover of Bonnie Jo Campbell's collection of stories, *Women and Other Animals*, there is a painting of a woman at a dinner table. Asleep on her plate is a little man with caliper-like legs; a very sharp knife is at the ready. The woman, dark-eyed, wears a knowing, slightly beleaguered expression. A cat rests one paw daintily on the tablecloth. Not this meal again, the woman might be thinking. Not this paunchy, sexless morsel - not the same thing I had last night! A follower of women's fiction might have similar misgivings, being in no hurry to tuck into yet another story in which trouble between the sexes is made into something unappetizing and predictable.

The reader need have no such fear in Campbell. Her men and women may not communicate terribly well or understand each other - they may not even like each other. The distance between them is so sharply mapped, however, and the prose so vivid, that the stories manage to be wise and hilarious at the same time.

In "The Perfect Lawn," Kevin - a pockmarked teenage boy - hides in the shrubbery so that he can spy on his beloved at her toilette. On his belly in a pile of dried leaves, dreaming of Madeline's red cheerleader underpants, Kevin is an easy target for disdain. But Campbell makes our sympathies surprise us - we like and dislike and rediscover each of her characters by turns. "Perhaps after Kevin and Madeline had gone together awhile, her mom and his dad would start dating. It gave Kevin a moment of relief to imagine the four playing cards or eating a Thanksgiving turkey." Voyeuristic teenage lust collides with tender domestic longing in a combination as improbable as it is irresistible.

Even better is "Eating Aunt Victoria," in which Bess, a shopping mall security guard, and her brother Hal, who is starting to date men, struggle to share their house with the "aunt" their dead mother left behind. Victoria was actually their mother's lover, a miserable ocean of a woman who keeps her snacks under lock and key. Campbell's disinterested moral outlook - she has no personal agenda, leaving her free to flesh out both the good and bad parts of the people in her stories - means that the sick twinge we feel, when Bess calls Hal "screwed up" for being gay, is short-lived. It's clear that Bess fears Hal will end up alone and, as he enters a strange new life, leave her behind, too. The story explodes - literally - as the five-hundred-pound Victoria crashes through their front porch steps. Bess and Hal leave her there for a bit, cruelly dangling sweets over the hole, while Victoria bleats increasingly slurred curses from beneath the house. Because Campbell understands, and communicates fully, the mixture of loneliness and grief that causes people to fail at love, the bit of meanness in this story is at once funny and human - a moment in the lives of three people about to part, probably forever.

Joy Katz, Ruminator Review

What's striking about this collection of sixteen stories is that they are all about women: old and young, mothers, sweethearts, and daughters in the hamlets of Michigan. They are on the verge of making life's most important decisions, invariably about the men they mean the most to and about the animals they observe, identify with, and learn lessons in life from: opossums, squirrels, cats and dogs, a forlorn pony, bats and gorillas, mallards and wild swans. (And, too, there are the trucks, the accoutrements of farm life, waiting at the circumference, either on blocks or axle-deep in mud, always missing some essential part). The animals, like the main players in some of Kafka's beast stories, share the burden of life's lethargies and cruelties.

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