

Beauty

By Raphael Selbourne

This 2009 winner of the Costa First Novel award held me spellbound as the story of Beauty, a Bangladeshi immigrant unfolded. Forced into an arranged marriage to a 45 year old mullah in her native country as a child, this spirited young woman returns to her family in England by pretending to be a madwoman. There, she faces a life of bullying and subservience to her father and two brothers, as she becomes the stand-in housekeeper and caretaker for the family which also includes her disabled mother and younger sister.

Life on the dole in the City of Wolverhampton brings Beauty to a career training center where she meets the types of people she most fears: lecherous Sikhs, black pimps, strong Somali women, and the mad English. As she emerges from the confines of home, she begins to understand that everyone might not be as they first appear in this economically and racially diverse world. Help comes from a most unexpected source, Mark Aston, a former inmate who smells of dogs, dirty clothing and alcohol and tobacco. When Mark rents her a room in his rundown house, a fondness grows between them that helps Beauty become more open as she struggles to understand what a life of choice and freedom might entail.

The author lives inside the mind of Beauty and shares her inner life with

us with a good deal of humor and understanding.

The Girl with Glass Feet

By Ali Shaw

A mythical and fantastical tale set in the gray, snow-glazed landscape of St. Hauda's Land, the main character Ida's feet are indeed turning to glass. Looking for a cure, her quest returns her to this strange place she once visited. She meets Midas Crook, an unlikely love interest who helps in her search, despite a remoteness as well-delineated as that of his homeland.

On the way, their two interconnected stories unfold as well as those of many of the locals: Henry who once loved Midas' mother and who raises miniature winged cattle; Carl, a scientist who worked with Midas' father and was in love with Ida's mother.

There is a sweetness about this work that carried it along, even for this non-fantasy devotee. Ali Shaw portrays the wide scope of love and longing, as it appears as unrequited love, misguided affection, inability to love and love prematurely lost. Love of life, and how one might choose to live out their last days is also central to this well-conceived tale. (Shortlisted for the 2009 Costa first novel award)



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The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake

By Aimee Bender

Eating a slice of the lemon cake her mother baked in celebration of her ninth birthday, Rose Edelstein is overcome with feelings of sadness and despair, feelings she comes to realize are her mother's, baked into the cake.

This new skill becomes part of her life as she discovers cookies baked in a rage; foods produced in factories that are not handled by humans and so have no emotional component, and finally some wonderful French food that is produced with love. As she makes these discoveries, she finds her brother may also have special skills and that her mother has acted on her feelings; both sets of circumstances that she struggles to understand.

Bender gives us a coming of age novel with a twist; her protagonist grows up under a different type of childhood and adolescent cloud. But as unique as it is, it frames her growing up in a more prosaic way, embodying the struggle to understand what life is about and why our fellow humans act as they do.

Crossing the Hudson

By Peter Stephan Jungk

While stalled in traffic on the Tappan Zee Bridge, Gustav discovers that his famous physicist father, Ludwig Rubin, dead for a number of years, is lying un-

der the bridge, naked and in huge relief.

Gustav's mother, Rosa accompanying him to his country house, also sees the great hulk of a man in plain sight. As both struggle for understanding of this odd event, Gustav focuses on his life growing up with his parents, Holocaust survivors that were less of a support, and more of a burden on their beleaguered son. This mythically strange event allows Gustav to consider breaking free from his life as dutiful son, married father of three, and an international furrier, a life that controls him and leaves him feeling unfulfilled.

Family Album

By Penelope Lively

The story centers around Allersmead, a grand old Edwardian house in England that houses two parents, an au pair and six children during the 1970's and 80's. As we look back from the present, the story unfolds as memories are shared by different members of the family. But primarily from the vantage of the eldest child, Gina, now an adult and international TV news correspondent. Gina has never quite forgiven her mother for favoring second child, Paul, who is still trying to find his place in the world.

We find an earth mother who cooks and adores her brood, a distant father more engaged in his writing than in any aspect of home life, an au pair who stays on after the children are grown, and the offspring, four girls and two boys who are

dispersed across the world.

Lively interweaves past and present as well as assorted narrators with great skill, never confusing this reader. As in any family narrative there are shared experiences that are remembered differently by each participant. And of course, as in all old homes, there is a secret or two that must be revealed.

In Other Rooms, Other Wonders

By Daniyal Mueenuddin

These beautifully written interconnected stories revolve around a rich Indian landowner, K.K. Harouni. Essentially a feudal lord, it is his patronage that allows his family and his servants to thrive. The life of the rich household portrayed is reminiscent of that seen in Aravind Adiga's **White Tiger**; all servants are at the mercy of a strict pecking order. Survival is precarious in this world, as Nawab the electrician finds out when he is attacked for the motorcycle his patron has provided. For the women, life is lived on a very slim margin that is rapidly crossed when a male protector is no longer at hand.

