



Female Trouble

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In Antonya Nelson's fourth collection of short stories she once again demonstrates why she is considered one of the leading fiction writers of her generation. Readers looking for feel-good literature or self-help fiction should steer clear of Nelson's work; readers searching, however, for a writer who combines wit, intelligence, and constant inventiveness with a mastery of the short story form, need to read Nelson's work.

In the title story, "Female Trouble," Peter McBride, a bricklayer in Arizona, finds himself up to his neck in relationships with women to whom, despite their oddities and inadequacies, he finds himself attracted. Surrounded by women slitting their wrists, giving birth to children whose fathers they don't know, and smoking enough marijuana to become happily complacent, he emerges as the character whose internal troubles the reader becomes absorbed by. His highjinks in love come back to haunt him until he decides to just leave all the complexity behind him; he yearns for a clean slate in love, and so he creates a fantasy world and leaves his real world of troubled love behind.

Nelson explores common emotions in uncommon ways. In "The Other Daughter," Nelson creates a narrator who is the "other daughter," the one without the beauty, the looks that turn heads. But the beautiful sister has recently lost part of her hand to a jealous classmate in shop class, and so the narrator needs to reinvent her feelings toward the sister she had always envied and to whom she felt inferior.

In "Happy Hour," the central character, Andrea, escapes the confines of her married life and motherhood through alcohol and an affair, trading in one set of problems for another. She loses herself in the new love, taking on her lover's interests and her lover's point-of-view, but anything like happiness still eludes her.

A summary of the stories cannot do justice to their humor, to the quirky inventiveness of the writing, or to the pathos of the characters' lives. Whether Nelson's central character is a middle-aged man in a Florida theme park with his infertile wife, or a young woman in a Colorado town involved with an arsonist, each is alive with the emotional complexity and levels of unfulfillment readers might recognize as similar to their own.

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