

The Art of Reading Gina Berriault

CLIMBING AND FALLING

OF THE many haunting images in Gina Berriault's short stories, one in particular strikes me as a distillation of her work's peculiar power. It occurs toward the end of "Bastille Day," in which an educated former journalist, now an alcoholic barely holding her life and marriage together, celebrates a solitary fortieth birthday moving from dive bar to dive bar among a bizarre cast of unfortunates. By night's end she has taken refuge from the San Francisco chill in the home of a mere acquaintance and lies beside him in his bed, "as close to the wall as she could get without touching it," fully dressed beneath the covers and still wearing her "dark, styleless" coat.

Though I did not quite know what to make of the story when I first encountered it—within a paperback anthology that had been abandoned at an inn where I was staying—after years of reading, rereading, and teaching Berriault's stories, I see how aptly this concluding image, with its simultaneous intimacy (the bed) and separation (the coat), embodies, literally, the distinct traits that make Berriault's work so oddly moving: vague physical and emotional discomfort, the aloof chill of the greater world, a sense of aloneness even among comrades, and, in the soft strangeness of this woman wearing her coat in bed, that fine line between the merely flailing and the fully lost.

While "Bastille Day" is not included in *Stolen Pleasures*, the latest compilation of Berriault's short fiction, published last year by Counterpoint Press, each one of the stories her longtime partner, Leonard Gardner, selected for the book might serve as instruction and inspiration for any writer striving to capture truth and beauty on the page. The better-known ones, such as "The Stone Boy" (the basis for the 1984 film of the same name starring Glenn Close and Robert Duvall) and the brilliantly creepy "The Cove," are lessons in calmly and powerfully building tension, while lesser-known classics such as "Lives of the Saints," "The Overcoat," and "Who Is It Can Tell Me Who I Am?" reveal Berriault's talent for swiftly drawn yet utterly unique characters.

What is troubling is that the publication of *Stolen*



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Pleasures was necessary at all. A more comprehensive collection, *Women in Their Beds* (Counterpoint, 1996), won major prizes and brought Berriault, who died in 1999 at the age of seventy-three, a brief spate of acclaim, including the PEN Faulkner Award, the Rea Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award—yet that book is now out of print. And while West Coast writers are perhaps more familiar with Berriault (a California native), ask even the best-read East Coaster and there's a good chance you'll see a shake of the head.

Andre Dubus called her “one of our best and most neglected writers,” yet Berriault seems to have viewed that neglect as a connective force. She once noted, “Obscurity isn't so dreadful, after all, once you see that you're not the only one who's unknown, once you accept that you're as unknowable by the world as the world is unknowable by you.”

This recognition of our shared mysteries and grievances is vital to Berriault's fiction, which looks at the world unflinchingly and without self-pity, and does not overtly tug at any heartstrings. Despite a constant tinge of darkness her stories wear their tragedies gently, rather than roil in catharsis—and I wonder if this subtlety may be one reason her work lacks a larger readership. Her characters range from famed novelists to waitresses, from social workers to vagrants; most live on the margins and many are drifters. Yet she approaches her subjects without sentimentality, revealing wisdom and humor, no matter how sad the situation, in seemingly effortless asides (such as that regarding an Arthur Koestler fan in “Death of a Lesser Man” who, after a lecture by the author himself, criticizes Koestler over some point “in which he had seemed untrue to his own self.”) The constant undercurrent of disquiet is also offset by the lyrical nature of Berriault's prose, which often surprises with its linguistic leaps. Take, for example, this moment in “A Dream of

Fair Women,” following a man's heart attack in a restaurant:

A napkin wet with ice water was passed from hand to hand and spread over his brow, a jigger of brandy was touched to his lips, and when it was seen that he was far, far beyond these clumsy persuasions, they stepped away from him.

While the passive verb structure and inventive phrasing (“clumsy persuasions”) convey the powerlessness of these bystanders—and also reveal our own bumbling humanness—the “far, far beyond” hints at the mystery of death and of all unknowable things, echoing that unbridgeable gulf between the naively hopeful and the forever fallen.

These days, when pithy commentary frequently takes the place of true reflection, when news has been replaced by gossip, and when “reality” counts only when amplified as entertainment, Berriault's stories, with their humble insistence on life's more quotidian mysteries, offer a rare breath of contemplation. Berriault never sensationalizes her characters, never stylizes them into quirkiness, noir, or the harsh bleakness of the faux-confessional; she never flaunts their small triumphs or misfortunes. She simply insists that every single person matters and that we not turn our gaze away.

In one understated example of this—the mysterious “Works of the Imagination”—a successful novelist suffering from writer's block holes up in a Swiss mountaintop hotel hoping to write his memoirs. Haunted by the Alpine view of “great silent mountains,” he cannot ignore his thoughts of impending age and mortality; he has left behind friends and loved ones and (worst of all, it seems) his curiosity and compassion, now replaced by “indifference, like a drugged sleep, to everyone else on earth.” Over the span of a few days, he observes two hikers, mere specks in the distance, making their way up the steep north ledge of

the mountain—until one day he sees one fall, then loses sight of them both. Terrified, he alerts a member of the hotel staff, only to be brushed off with the assurance, “No one is climbing and no one is falling.”

This polite, professional negation of the very summary of human existence might be Berriault’s warning of our own natural tendency to overlook those who try but do not succeed, to turn away from the unfortunate so as not to witness other people’s hard luck. What makes Berriault so necessary is that, like the man squinting in his hotel room, she takes the time to note—not as a voyeur but with true empathy—the ephemeral, the disregarded, and the people no one else has quite been able to see.

WRITING is work,” Berriault stated during her acceptance speech for a gold medal (her second) from the Commonwealth Club, for *Women in Their Beds*, “and, more often than not, it is hard work.” She made her living, and raised a daughter, as a self-supporting writer—of stories, of novels, of magazine articles (namely for *Esquire* in the 1960s and 1970s) and screenplays. Born in 1926 in California, the daughter of Latvian and Lithuanian immigrants, she began writing fiction when still a child, on the typewriter her father used as a freelance writer for trade journals. This, of course, was during the Depression; her father struggled to make a living, lost their house, and the family lived in continually reduced circumstances. When Berriault was fourteen, her mother went blind, and she was still in her teens when her father suddenly died. To support her mother and siblings, Berriault took on her father’s job as writer-editor for a jewelry-industry magazine and became the family breadwinner.

Busy working for a living, she did not attend college, did not take writing workshops or literature courses.



Gina Berriault in the mid 1960s.

But she read voraciously and wrote fiction in her free time, teaching herself how to write short stories. She called those authors whose books she most loved—particularly the Russians Chekhov, Turgenev, Gogol, and Bunin—her mentors. Over four decades she published stories in the *Paris Review*, *Mademoiselle*, *Esquire*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Ploughshares*, and the *Threepenny Review*, winning Pushcart and O. Henry prizes. Her first book, the fiction collection *The Mistress and Other Stories*, was published in 1965, and her second collection, *The Infinite Passion of Expectation*, came out in 1982. And despite publishing four novels and the screenplay for the movie version of “The Stone Boy,” she viewed herself above all as a short story writer, acknowledging late in life that if it were not for publishers always asking for novels, she would have preferred to focus on the shorter genre. “I wish I’d written twenty stories to

one novel, instead,” she told Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver in an interview included in *The Tea Ceremony: The Uncollected Writings of Gina Berriault* (Counterpoint, 2004).

But writing was her livelihood—income from publications, from grants and fellowships (among them awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation), and from her work as a writing teacher, at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and San Francisco State University. It was also, according to Gardner, her spiritual nourishment. “Of course she had days of frustration,” he wrote in his foreword to *The Tea Ceremony*, “but writing filled a fun-

damental need of her spirit, and she believed creativity not used turned destructive, not least to the self.”

Explaining this need, this literary impulse, she often referred to her mother’s loss of eyesight, describing how she “went blind expecting God to intervene” and “sat before her little mound-shape radio listening to those false dramas and waving her hand before her eyes, expecting it to take shape out of the dark.” In interviews, Berriault wondered aloud if, by writing fiction, she herself hoped to bring a shape “from out of the dark.”

EACH of Berriault’s stories carries a tenor of unease or discomfort, whether from yearning or grief or the grit of the San Francisco streets. Sometimes the discomfort is situational, as in “Women in Their Beds,” with its residents of a public mental ward, or “The Mistress,” whose female

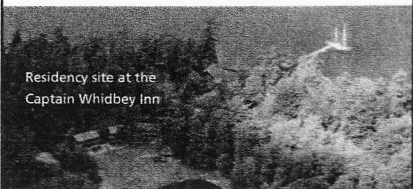


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protagonist meets the son of a former lover and cannot prevent herself from telling him who she is. Sometimes the unease is a matter of tone and pacing, as in the steadily gathering tension of "The Cove." Quite often the discomfort is physical, caused by travel or dislocation, for Berriault's characters are often en route somewhere (or nowhere in particular), crossing bridges and borders, whether on the depressing pub crawl of "Bastille Day," seeking a reclusive novelist in "The Search for J. Kruper," or following the trail of a famous sculptor's public artworks in "Lives of the Saints."

In "The Overcoat"—perhaps Berriault's most moving work—Eli, a young man ravaged by drug addiction and its fatal corollaries (AIDS, hepatitis—who knows) makes a final pilgrimage to visit his estranged parents. The overcoat of the title is a Goodwill find from "an old girlfriend who wasn't his lover anymore but stayed around just to be his friend." Too big for him, it weighs "as much as two overcoats"—the weight, perhaps, of the mother and father of his troubled youth, both of whom we soon understand to be equally troubled.

Despite the nod to Gogol's story, Berriault's "The Overcoat," with its atmosphere of disarticulation, brings to my mind Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." For with his constantly shaking hands and barely staved-off panic attacks, Eli is, we are told, a "spectacle." And like Gregor Samsa—he of that other wounded psyche, those other trembling limbs—he lies on a strange bed shivering under the shell of his overcoat, listening to noises he cannot quite place, "until he took the noise by surprise and caught it coming from his own mouth, an attempt from sleep to give an account of himself." When he at last rises and dons his coat to seek out his father, he is "like an immense black beetle."

Eli's alcoholic father, too, has become a grotesque, shrunken by age, deformed by arthritis, his voice "the high-pitched whisper of a woman struggling with a man." He seems at

first unable to view his son clearly, seeing instead the overcoat that hides him:

"That's a big overcoat you got there," his father said, "You prosperous?"

"I'm so prosperous I got a lot of parasites living off me."

Having for years been taught to blame his every failure on his parents, Eli now resents such facile dicta and the various professionals "who said they were there to help him. Smirky parole officers and smug-faced boy psychologists in leather jackets, jiving with him like a cellmate, and that female social worker in her short skirt..." His voyage back to his parents is a genuine effort at forgiveness, for it is an honest attempt to *understand* them—the signature sentiment of Berriault's work. Yet rather than clarifying anything, Eli's encounter with his mother, in the "rest home" to which she is now confined, is as surreal as anything in Kafka, as shown in this exchange after she announces to Eli that there has been an earthquake:

"Did you feel it? Bricks fell down. We thought the whole damn place was coming down."

"I wasn't here."

"Were you scared?"

"I wasn't here."

"Go on. I bet you were scared."

"I died in it," he said. If she wanted his company in her earthquake it was no trouble to oblige. It made no difference, afterwards, when or where you died, and it was easier to tell her he was already dead than tell her he was going to be soon, maybe even before he could get up from this bench.

It is worth noting that the earthquake imagery recalls that of the mental hospital in "Women in Their Beds," where "each morning the women's ward appeared to have undergone a quake in the night.... *What's*

happening here? The question on each face upon a pillow.” Eli’s attempt to commune with his mother on her terms, by reaching out to—into—her addled mind, reveals the empathy that informs all of Berriault’s stories and that is (or *should* be) every writer’s fundamental imperative.

BERRIAULT viewed writing as her contribution, her responsibility to the world. Perhaps it was also an expression of gratitude. Recalling the books that kept her afloat during her childhood, she explained, in her interview with Lyons and Oliver, the vital importance of writers: “They bring you to see your own existence as valuable—why else would they write their stories for you?—and they seem to be giving you their blessing to write your own. They seem to be blessing all children, even those who can’t read a word.”

Though her subject matter may

be weighty and her terrain rough, Berriault treats all matters with a delicate touch, and I can’t help wondering if this narrative aloofness—floating slightly above her characters, creating a distance between the reader and the protagonists—is the reason Berriault is not as widely beloved as other masters of the story form. (Beloved, I should clarify, by general-interest readers; Berriault has long been referred to as a “writer’s writer.” Sigh.)

Compared, for instance, with the direct and intimate voice of a writer like Alice Munro, whose narration is often in the first person and seems to confide in the reader, Berriault hovers above scenes in a way that sometimes lends them a sense of inscrutability, the reader discovering only gradually what is truly going on within the characters. Sometimes this slight emotional distance is conveyed through anonymity, with characters referred to only by their pronouns (in “The Mistress” and “The Light at Birth,” for instance), and

in some cases it is exaggerated to great effect, as in the superbly chilling “The Cove.” This slight remoteness and emotional restraint—like that of the woman in her coat in bed—is key to Berriault’s outlook (the inevitable separation between human beings despite our shared humanity) and recalls the careful composure of stories by Mavis Gallant and Edith Pearlman, whose narrators are often similarly perched at a remove yet able to put into words the finest emotional nuance. As in the work of both those writers, Berriault’s stories have a dignified timelessness.

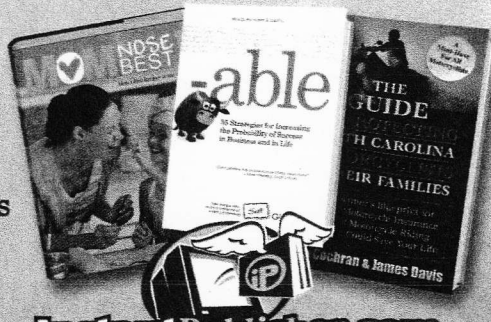
Just three of the stories in *Stolen Pleasures* are written in the first person. Of these, the standout is “The Diary of K. W.,” a tragicomic delight even as the aging diarist-protagonist heads toward ruin. A long-ago high school valedictorian who might have had some other, happier life, K. W. has instead ended up as a menial worker at a “standing-up job” (like so many attendants of “elevators, counters, cafeterias”) and,

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when we meet her, has developed an unrequited crush on a young male neighbor—an obsession that leads to her demise.

Berriault never belittles this woman, whose voice compels us with its clear-eyed descriptions of “a plumber with a lower lip like a pitcher spout,” or an old, spent man who “walks so slowly because he went to extremes in his youth.” (We are told that “on a leash he’s got a dog the size of a dried pea.”) Despite our growing awareness of K. W.’s mental disintegration, we trust her insights regarding this society in which women become meaningless as they age, where an old woman can be disregarded to the point of invisibility—as opposed to the neighbor’s youthful girlfriend, “that girl, with no kinship in her eyes, creature of my own sex but oh so different from me, so young and so well fed with love and the stares of strangers.” In comparison, K. W. is not only impoverished but also famished, surviving on

“withered apples” as she herself withers.

Wanting to give the younger man a painting she has made, K. W. is unable to sign her full name to the accompanying note she leaves for him, because, as she puts it, “It made me wonder too much who I was.” Instead she signs just her initials, the first step in her gradual self-effacement, which becomes literal as she slowly starves to death. Yet her disintegration derives not from insanity as much as from her sensitivity, her compassion for the many other beings she worries about: those poorer than herself, sickly dogs, the cats her neighbor has forgotten to feed.

This burdensome sensitivity is, of course, the curse and honor of any writer, not just the diarist K. W. Berriault reflected on her own authorial inclination in an essay titled “Almost Impossible,” which appears in *The Tea Ceremony*. “I must have tried to save lives from vanishing by ensnaring them in stories,” she wrote.

BERRIAULT referred to herself as a humanitarian, and indeed there is something consummately humane about her perspective. Accepting the Commonwealth Club’s California Book Award in 1996, she made a point of opening her speech by declaring, “This gold medal given to me for my work takes nothing away from the value and the beauty of the work of other writers.”

That she chose to make this gesture right at the outset says much about her generosity and communal vision, as well as, perhaps, her own experience as a frequently overlooked author. Her work rings with an acute sense of the often surprising (and at times barely existent) separation between success and failure, between contentedness and misery, between the merely unhappy and the truly unfortunate. Berriault is painfully aware of how little it might take for anybody to slip into insanity—such as the woman in

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her coat in "Bastille Day" who, finding herself among that loony crew of barflies, wonders "if she, herself, was an asylum inmate, on a night out just because it was her birthday and they allowed it." This sentiment resonates powerfully in stories such as "Who Is It Can Tell Me Who I Am?," whose librarian-protagonist's concern for a homeless man derives in part from the awareness that, with worse luck, he himself might have endured a similar fate.

The librarian is one of many characters who have already escaped something; Berriault views the world as a "refugee camp." Besides war and politics, her refugees have fled poverty, delinquent parents, and other unextraordinary catastrophes. Many have been abandoned, whether intentionally or not, and others have left things behind (lovers, children, expectations). One of the most profound examples is "Sublime Child," in which the teenage protagonist, newly orphaned, clings

disastrously to her relationship with her mother's boyfriend while simultaneously attempting to forge a normal friendship with a girl her own age.

A more uplifting example is the wonderful "Lives of the Saints," where we meet a young man whose father, a well-known sculptor, publicly denies having ever fathered him, in order to retain his professional image as a pious celibate. Responding with a negative critique of his father's artwork, the rejected son then feels remorseful and, worrying that he has betrayed "his kinship with all abandoned creatures," sets out on a pilgrimage across California to visit each of the saints his father has sculpted. He is determined to find something worthy in each piece—to find within them the heart of the man who has treated him heartlessly.

Though we sense that the son's original critique is correct (that there is something false in his father's work just as there is in the man himself), it turns out that external circumstances

have humanized these sculptures, profaning them with graffiti, camouflaging them with foliage, ignoring them. In one case, weather has left the paint "scaling off, fading, so that the face resembled that of a blind leper." Yet none of these transformations are romanticized, and Berriault makes sure to poke some fun at public and corporate art: One of the saints, an onlooker insists, is "not a sculpture but a state-of-the-the-art sewage disposal plant." Another, housed in an industrial park, turns out to have no redeeming qualities at all, even after the son sits all day "in staring search of the spirit of love somewhere in that figure."

This open-minded—if at times doomed—search for love in all and everything is the great gift of Gina Berriault's stories. And it is a reminder to those of us who consider ourselves writers that the "staring search" continues, even when those distant specks on the mountain ledge have long dropped out of sight. ∞

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