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## The Will to Read

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### STRANGE WEATHER

Becky Hagenston

Press 53

<http://www.press53.com>

115 pages; paper, \$14.00

Becky Hagenston's collection of stories, *Strange Weather*, is like an annoying member of your extended family you keep hoping will pan out and become the uncle or cousin you've always wished he would be. I didn't give up on *Strange Weather*, though it took an act of will not to, and in the end, I was rewarded by two or three mostly good stories. The truest emotional intensity happened for me on page 113; unfortunately, the book ended two pages later. Still, by then I felt at last that if there were more of the book I would have read on willingly.

Hagenston tries to get at the emotional intensities of human experience, and she does arrange her characters in situations that provide potential for such explorations. But even when she manages to get some emotional momentum going in a story, she trips herself up with stylistic clumsiness, clichés, vague allusions or metaphors, or such bizarre turns of event that the story becomes not fantastical or magical but ridiculous. One feels most of Hagenston's blunders should have been caught by her editor.

For instance, Hagenston has a penchant for interrupting herself with syntactically unrelated parenthetical sentences that compromise the style and readability of her prose: "A couple from Kent drowned when they tried to rescue their dog (it lived) from a frozen pond." Or worse: "But Henry wasn't paying attention, he was flipping through a book of paintings (they were in his office; the Fine Arts Building was closed and quiet for the break) of a heavy-lidded, tragic-looking woman with auburn hair so thick and beautiful it looked like something alive." Such interruptions are unnecessary and distracting, and occur so often as to be thoroughly annoying.

Even worse is Hagenston's prodigious use of clichés. The book is riddled with them: "I don't know what I would do without you"; "he was a grown man, he could take care of himself"; "everything works out for the best"; "he looked at Nancy as if she hung the moon." Hagenston appears to believe it is permissible, even desirable, to use clichés in dialogue or as the thoughts of characters, but the effect is to make the characters at times less interesting and the prose less than tolerable.

It also leaves the impression the writer is condescending to her characters. The story "Anthony" concerns the ghost of "a young black male" of the same name that has taken up residence in the stomach of a blonde preschooler named Cindy. The child's mother wonders whether the cause of this is "something in the water." The child's father complains to the mother, "'It's because you don't make her take a bath every day.'" One would hope the author intends to deal straightforwardly and refreshingly with stereotypes about the "young black male." But the story does just the opposite: the ghost of the young black man is a ghastly conglomeration of stereotypes couched in clichés. The story's white characters are about as poor, uneducated, and down on their luck as Anthony was in life, but only the ghost drops his g's:

"'Just lyin' here, collectin' my thoughts,'" he says. He's also big on double negatives—"Don't need no sleep"—and, of course, "ain't." He repeatedly belts out, "Time to party"; punctuates his need to party with "Hell yeah!"; and announces, "I feel like dancin'." Hagenston tries to balance out Anthony as a stereotype with the stereotype of the educated kindergarten teacher Miss Missy, who has "seen the spirit of her lynched grandfather swinging from a tree" and who grew up in Tuscaloosa eating chitlins. Nia, her co-worker Sherry, and the nurse at the child's school each find solace in their unhappy lives through their conversations with Anthony, and all three of the women fall in love with him; in fact, he becomes the story's hero. But it's hard to know what all of this adds up to.

The story clearly aims for an emotional impact, but it misses its mark because Hagenston never manages to achieve the suspension of disbelief that a story of this sort requires. As a reader, I need to be so seduced by the emotional truth of a story that I no longer care whether or not the fantastical thing that is happening in the story could have happened—as in, say, "The Metamorphosis" or "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." But I am not moved in the least by Hagenston's Anthony. He's just a stereotype who talks in clichés, and he is ultimately, or rather, immediately, ridiculous.

### ***Strange Weather is like an annoying member of your extended family.***

Hagenston also likes to allude to dramatic events that have little relation to her story. For example, in one story she mentions "people freezing to death all over England," but because it is not integral to the story, it ends up meaning little to nothing.

The strongest stories in the collection are the last three: "Grand Canyon," "Poison," and "Strange Weather." "Poison" in particular comes very close to success, especially stylistically. Granted, even here Hagenston's writing is marred by the occasional cliché ("you gotta do what you gotta do"), but there are fine passages, as well, like this one:

It rained last night but you can't tell now, except for the pieces of shaggy palm tree lying like wreckage on the pavement. The heat is like something with hands; Cathy can feel it around her neck and on the top of her head and the backs of her legs. This was the sort of thing she'd expected—a sun that bore down on her like a beam from a spaceship; a dried-out world. To the north, the Catalina Mountains are hazy blue lumps.

Hagenston's metaphor here is a nicely integrated part of her story about a young woman and her troubled relationship with her parents and herself. Unfortunately, even this promising story has a weak ending. It ends with what is, in the context of the story, an ironic cliché, but irony isn't enough to save it: "We all deserve to be happy," Cathy's coworker says,



*Detail from cover*

and "all Cathy can do is nod and say yes, yes, we certainly do." Unfortunately, Hagenston often ends her stories this way.

It's in her final, title story, "Strange Weather," that she achieves the strongest emotional intensity of the collection. True, there are, as usual, some pieces of her fictional puzzle missing—why the father's country singer girlfriend from nineteen years ago shows up, what exactly the mother does to the girlfriend at the end of the story. Nevertheless, a couple of pages from the end of the book, I am riveted. Hagenston's description of the characters and the unexpectedness of their behavior is wonderful, as in this moment:

And then she was running down the porch steps, her entire body strumming some chord she almost knew. When she leaned breathless through the car's open window, a baggy-eyed woman regarded her warily. Her skirt was bunched up, revealing saggy knees. She wore orange lipstick. There was a slash of puckered flesh between her eyebrows. "Take me with you," Thea whispered, and she caught a whiff of something warm and sour as the country singer leaned toward her, as if for a kiss.

How frustrating it is, then, when, at the end of the story, Thea asks her mother what she has done with her father's girlfriend, and her mother says, "'None of your business.'" Why keep this essential bit of the story a secret from the reader? And then there's another closing cliché to top it off, as Thea muses, "Who knew what a woman—even a woman like her mother—was capable of doing for love?"

In short, there are some lovely moments in Hagenston's writing, but sadly, there are no fully successful stories in this book.

*Stormy Stipe's poems have appeared in The Texas Review, her book reviews in Biblio magazine, and her fiction in The Missouri Review. She received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and her PhD in literature and creative writing from the University of Houston. She teaches creative writing and English literature at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and lives in Madison, Wisconsin.*