

(FICTION)

EDGE OF THE WORLD

A striking new voice conjures complex social and moral realities on the Carolina coast in the Revolutionary War era

By Elyse Moody



Katy Simpson Smith's hypnotic debut novel, *The Story of Land and Sea* (Harper), contains a galleon's worth of adventure. Ghosts! Pirates! Elopement on a tall ship! But don't expect a rollicking sea shanty of a tale. Instead, Smith gives us a decidedly unromanticized portrait of life on the untamed postcolonial North Carolina coast.

John, an ex-pirate who's fond of Milton and Marlowe, lost his wife, the aptly named Helen, in childbirth, and has raised their daughter, Tabitha, alone. His father-in-law, Asa, a puritanical turpentine magnate whose wife perished the same way, has little empathy for John; Asa believes John seduced Helen, who "abandoned her inheritance to set sail with the soldier on a black-flagged ship, and... come home with a belly full of child." John also has a tenuous relationship with Moll, an outspoken slave who was



Smith

Helen's childhood companion. When Tab falls ill, John talks their way onto a Bermuda-bound vessel, thinking the salt air might cure her—only the first of many ill-starred escape attempts in this story.

Smith's Beaufort is a once bustling port city now becalmed, where men bear God's wrath and "women were the ones who died." Smith evokes their ghosts in lyrical, shivery passages: "[John] wakes...to [Helen's] voice calling him. He walks...to the marsh, where he closes his eyes and lets the wind pulse at him; through the harshness of brine and shore decay, he catches again the blooming smell of her." Later, as if conjured, Helen comes to life when Smith backtracks to her childhood and courtship amid the Revolutionary War, before returning to the tragic knot of choices the grief-stricken John, Asa, and Moll now face.

Smith employs a style of impressively measured, atmospheric understatement in her unabashedly stark descriptions, and we thrill to watch her characters row stoically into a darkening future. ●

(NONFICTION)

BOYS TO WOMEN

Fascinating deep reportage on life, gender, and fate in an unusual Afghan tradition

By Kestiah Weir

"We are just talking about a child. Why is it important to manifest her female gender, especially when it marks the little girl as a weaker, more constrained, child, of lesser value?" writes reporter Jenny Nordberg in *The Underground Girls of Kabul* (Crown), reconstructing the reasoning of Azita, a mother of four and one of several Afghan women Nordberg got to know while writing this book. Azita is a member of the Afghan parliament; when her youngest daughter, Manoush, was six, she decided the girl would become a boy: the family's first son, Mehran.

An Afghan family may raise a daughter as a *bacha posh* (literally, "dressed up as a boy") for a time because even a false son can enjoy an education and freedoms not afforded ordinary girls. Though the practice is not uncommon, it was

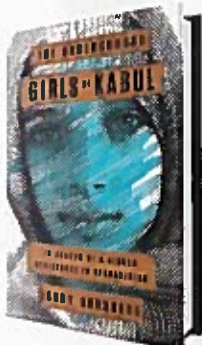
not widely reported on until Nordberg broke the story in *The New York Times* in 2010; now, five years of intensive reporting have yielded this gritty, poignant, and provocative collage of intimate portraits. Nordberg conjures here a whole social world of individuals who possess rich inner lives glimpsed through her astute and subtle eye.

Mehran's story is one of many that unfold in *Underground Girls*: Shukria, a former *bacha posh*, served as a protector for her older brother; Zahra, a teenager, intends to remain living as a man forever; Mehran's mother was once a *bacha posh* and transitioned smoothly back into her femininity, with new skills and perspective that she sees as an overwhelming advantage.

Working with a topic that could easily alienate readers, Nordberg conveys captivating nuance and complexity; just when you feel some kind of judgment or conclusive opinion is within reach, she deftly turns the tables, leaving us to re-examine our own prejudices and societal norms as we struggle with questions that are perhaps unanswerable—such as, who is to say what makes up a woman? ●



Nordberg



(BOOKS)

TRUST US

A MASTER'S IMAGINARIUM

Visionary Canadian author **Margaret Atwood** calls the nine speculative fictions that make up *Stone Mattress* (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday) "tales about tales," derived from ancient folk tradition. Prepare to meet besotted artists, widows guided by departed voices, populist activists, billion-year-old crime avengers, and even a flash-frozen groom.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Ann Hood's new novel, *An Italian Wife* (Norton), is a multigenerational saga spanning more than a century that begins with 15-year-old Josephine Rimaldi's arranged marriage in Italy in 1909. After joining her husband in America, they raise a family of six children whose own life stories add texture and tension. A seventh child provides a stirring surprise.

PROBLEMATIC POSTMODERNITIES

The Emerald Light in the Air (Farrar, Straus and Groux) collects seven of **Donald Antrim's** sophisticated stories, set mostly in New York City, that explore the messy business of living with oneself—and with significant others. The tragicomic volume from the MacArthur Fellow includes "He Knew," about a troubled couple undertaking a ritual shopping trip while literally hanging on to one another for dear life. —L. S.

Still lifes: Philip Friedman/Studio D; Smith: Elyse Smith; Nordberg: Magnus Forsberg