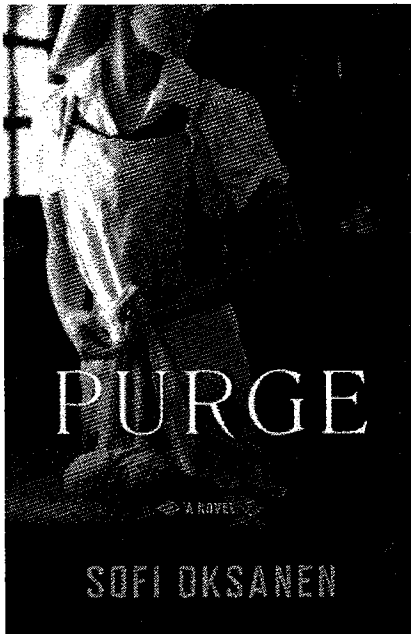


July/August 2010

Purge
Sofi Oksanen
Grove Press/Black Cat, 2010



Sofi Oksanen drops us right into the small cottage of Aliide Truu after a thin, straggly, unkempt young woman of questionable origin is found in her yard. We are given details about a ripped dress, fingernails, and telltale torn tights. Oksanen gives us the entire gray, sad mystery from every thought and detail to the larger hidden story we uncover bit by bit.

Oksanen alternates between a 1990s Estonia struggling to join the rest of the Western world in its fashion and technology, and a 1940s Estonia struggling to join the rest of the Western world in obtaining a state of political freedom and rest. The characters' blunt acceptance of the depressing conditions is typically Scandinavian, bringing to mind the people and events of Haldor Laxness's *Independent People*.

Details build this story as Oksanen catalogues every item in the house, from worn wooden floorboards to a description of the sausages on the table. All senses are engaged as we imagine the taste of the bitter percolated rationed coffee, smell Martin's sour odor, hear the cabinet scratching into place to hide Hans, taste the valerian Aliide prepares. Like Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Oksanen manages to paint *Purge* as a vivid adventure

within a cottage we know inside and out, the way we knew every inch of the boat in *Life of Pi*.

Politics are a physical character, directing everyone's actions. Oksanen's historical research is thorough—though she is young enough to be one or two generations removed from the era's experiences. She sets the political climate with details about the uniforms, songs sung throughout the town, and the fear that everyone lived in. Aliide even marries oily, shady Martin for the political power she thinks he has.

The love story: two sisters in love with one man. A *Romeo and Juliet*-esque demise is quite romantic for a Finnish work: a bit of reindeer with your squash and cream potatoes.

—Tatiaana L. Laine

Purge
Sofi Oksanen
Grove Press/Black Cat, 2010

Nuori, epäsiisti nainen on löydetty Aliide Truun pihasta. Saame tietää että revitty kolttu, sukkahousut ja sormenkynet ovat myös löydetty paikan päältä. Sofi Oksanen vie meidät pieneen pirttiin. Oksanen kertoo meille tämän synkän tarinan yksityiskohtaisesti. Toinen, piilotettu tarina selviää meille pikku hiljaa.

Oksanen kertoo 1990s Virosta jolloin kansa yritti liittyä Euroopan kulttuurin, teknologiaan, ynm. Välillä hän kertoo 1940s Virosta, jolloin kansa taisteli vapaudesta. Kirjan henkilöt suostuu näihin oloihin, ja tämä on tyypillistä pohjoismaalaista oloa. Tulee mieleen Haldor Laxnessin *Independent People*.

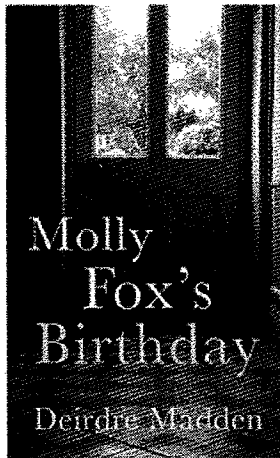
Yksityiskohdat kertoavat meillä tämän tarinan. Oksanen kertoo meille kuluneista lattioista ja makkaroista. Maistamme kortilla ostettua kahvia, haistamme happamia hajuija, kuulemme kaapin siirtoa, ynm. Kuten vene Yann Martelin *Life of Pi*:ssa, Oksanen näyttää meille pirtin joka nurkan.

Sofi Oksanen on tutkinut täydellisesti ajat ja paikat. Hän vie meidät siihen poliittiseen henkeen, puvut, laulut ja pelko. Vaikka itse ei ole nähnyt näitä aikoja. Aliide nai Martinin, sillä hän uskoa että miehellä on politista voimaa. Tässä on rakkaus tarina myös. Siskot rakastavat yhtä ja samaa miestä. Vahan *Romeo ja Juliet* suomalaisittain. Suomalaista romanssia, poroa ja perunamuusia.

Translated into Finnish by Tatiaana L. Laine

July/August 2010

Molly Fox's Birthday Deirdre Madden
Picador, 2010



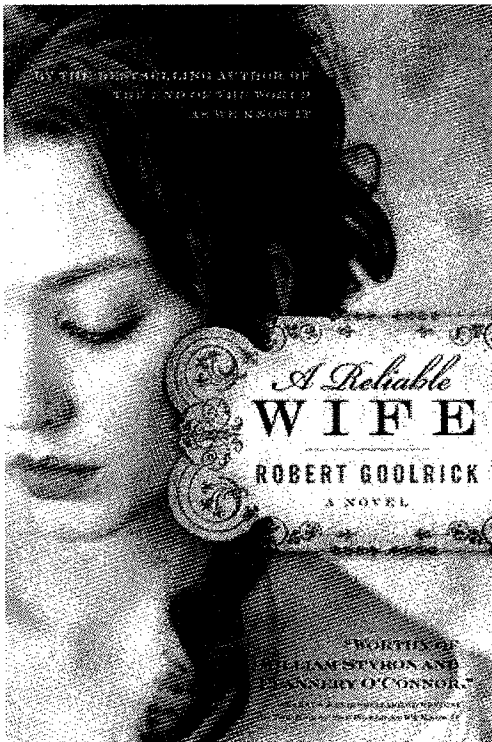
There is the issue of Molly Fox's fame. Our narrator attempts to convince us that she only thinks of Molly as a simple, honest friend and is not star-struck by her friend's fame and award-winning stage performances. While our narrator is successful in her own right, she is, by nature of her profession, less recognizable, and this seems to create a small, nagging sense of insecurity in her. She met Molly by having a slight crush on her, and they later became close as Molly acted in several of her plays.

Like Fox, Deirdre Madden spotlights adoration—whether it's the narrator's adoration of Molly Fox, or their male friend's admiration of various women in his life. Her attention to detail can be somewhat tedious, dragging the 24-hour span of the novel. But there is an authenticity to it all which is perhaps, if not show-stopping, the more divine intention of theater.

—Tatiaana L. Laine

June 2010

A Reliable Wife
Robert Goolrick
(Algonquin, 2010)



Robert Goolrick's debut novel explores issues of loyalty, desire, and love, detouring into the backstreets of its characters' former lives and sexual histories. Powerful but lonely Ralph Truitt; deceitful yet surprisingly loyal Catherine Land; and the predictably wild Tony Moretti—quick scenes and fast dialogue convey their past exploits, present interests, and sometimes cruel intentions, all with a sense of cold Midwestern acceptance of circumstances.

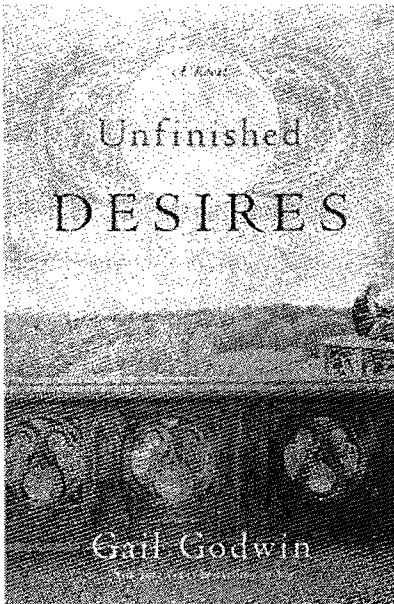
Ralph Truitt places an ad in a newspaper for a “reliable wife,” and instead gets a woman who is reliable only in her determination to gain his wealth for both herself and Tony, a useless boytoy, who also happens to be Truitt's ex-wife's illegitimate son. Ralph repents for a youth of wasted time, money, and love by attempting to save Tony from a future life of regret. All three participate in a history of whoring and deceit—Ralph in the past, Tony in the present, and Catherine with one foot in the past and one in the present. Both

Ralph and Catherine have spent great deals of their respective lives attempting to save women—Emilia and Alice, respectively—who were determined to continue into lives of self-destruction. Both women stated they hated their saviors, Ralph and Catherine, who continued their salvation efforts despite the lack of appreciation. Catherine's repeated admission of her unkindness prefaces her slow murder of Ralph by arsenic, but she is seemingly overcome by kindness, wealth, and affection, leading her to heal him in a matter-of-fact, seemingly guiltless act of nursing. The ugly, conniving side of life shows our cynical view of self-fulfilling relationships as disposable. Each character's pursuit of self-interest blinds them from compassion—whether as a lover, friend, sister, son, or father—that surrounds us on a daily basis. Goolrick shows us the potential of ourselves to become any number of people: a cold, feared, lonely businessman; a distant, selfish lover safe behind his façade as a second-rate musician and playboy; a scheming woman whose plans of deceit are interrupted by true love and compassion. These individuals attempt to survive the harsh, lonely Midwestern winter, through their reincarnations of themselves.

—*Tatiaana L. Laine*

February 2010

Gail Godwin
Unfinished Desires
(Random House, 2009)



Gail Godwin's highly-anticipated novel, *Unfinished Desires* takes the reader into the personal memoirs of Mother Suzanne Ravenal, as she documents her experiences as headmistress at the prestigious North Carolina girls' Catholic School, Mount St. Gabriel's. Godwin (*New York Times* bestselling author of *Evensong* and *The Finishing School*) thoroughly portrays the intense bond formed between women (both during their student years and later as adults) who attend Catholic school together, sharing that additional element of faith that students of non-Catholic school do not experience with one another.

This novel jumps between various points of the current decade and the 1950s, as Mother Suzanne Ravenal tells her personal history set within the history of Mount St. Gabriel's. She completes her memoir at the request of a former student, exemplifying how attached former students are to their alma mater, that they would request such a work and provide accommodations for this ailing nun in the twilight of her life.

The seemingly tight-knit small town community unravels as the stories of individuals are told. In true small southern town fashion, everyone is related by blood, friendship, or

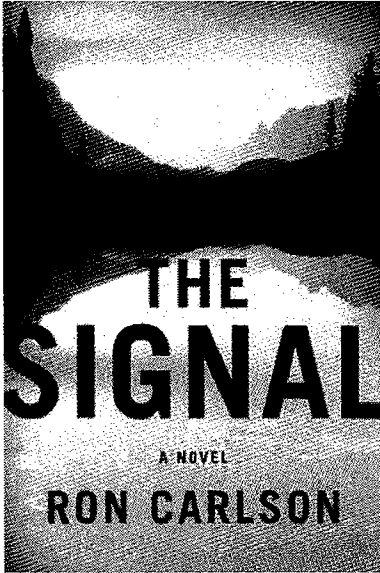
conflict. There is nowhere to hide in either a small town or the Catholic church, and ghosts are everywhere.

Tildy, Chloe, and Maud (all daughters of Mount St. Gabriel's graduates) are a triangle of girls with a moody friendship. Needy, histrionic Tildy is at the helm, controlling first Maud and then Chloe from under her delusional, self-important mother's wing. Home lives receive equal weight to school lives, as the girls are influenced heavily by both settings. Ravenal, a feared and respected headmistress, recalls the drama of that particular class via memoir chapters, interspersed with Godwin's thorough narrative of events. Gail Godwin has a strong grasp on the bond formed in a setting as intense as Catholic school, and provides complex characters with authentic personalities who could be envisioned in these roles as clearly as if it were a movie.

—Tatiaana L. Laine

December 2009/January 2010

The Signal
Ron Carlson
(VIKING, 2009)



Ron Carlson's novel about love and ranching life in Wyoming is a short, fun gallop through the relationship of Mack and Vonnie (as well as Mack and Yarnell, Mack and his father, Mack and Mack). Mack, a hand on the family ranch, met Vonnie, a musician, when they were teenagers. He was leading guided horse rides for wealthy vacationers, she was a wealthy vacationer: *Dirty Dancing* on a ranch instead of Kellerman's resort. She fell in love with both him and the idea of him, a strapping young cowboy. He just fell in love with her, a smart, strong, beautiful woman. They kept in touch during college, and met again as adults to continue this fairytale romance.

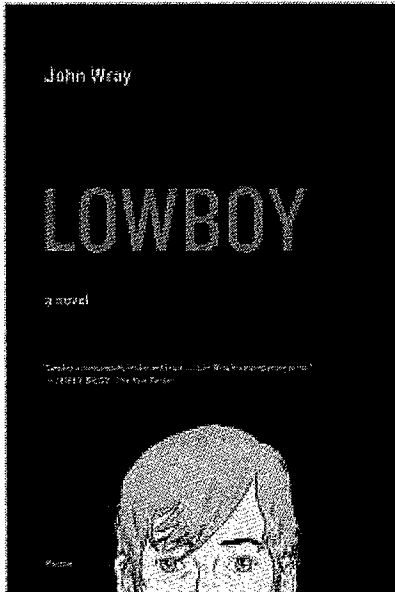
Carlson keeps this from becoming a cliché cowboy song by making Mack a desperate hustler. The family ranch is in the weeds, and Carlson sees this as an opportunity to get Mack involved in scams and drug runs for Yarnell, the town scumbag, trying to stay afloat while cheating and drinking to kill his marriage. Vonnie has to make a decision between the fantasy of Mack the Cowboy and Kent, a wealthy man, who happens to have had altercations with Mack. Continuing the theme of romance, Mack and Vonnie meet up for their annual hiking trip, only Mack has two ulterior motives: winning Vonnie back, and making some money tracking some mysterious aircraft debris for Yarnell.

The details of ranching life and horses adds an educated, well-researched element to this otherwise light, story about love gone sour. Carlson's use of realistic dialogue, honest

interpersonal relationships, the twist of random airplane remnants and of foot soldiers chasing these wild, crazy lovebirds around the mountain throws some grit into this cowboy romance.

—TATIAANA LAINE

June 2009



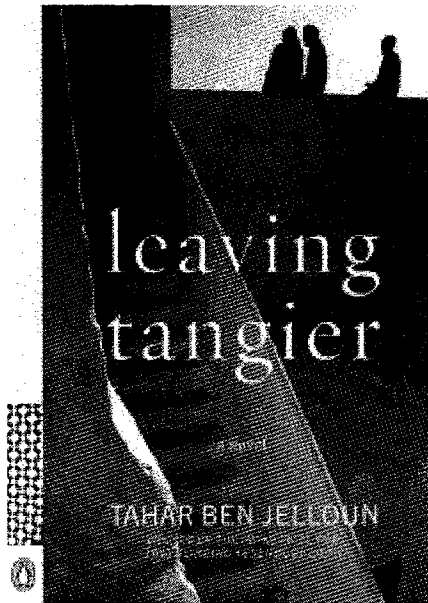
John Wray
Lowboy
(FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 2009)

John Wray (*Canaan's Tongue*) delivers another fast-paced novel which takes us through the New York City subway system, tracking a schizophrenic sixteen-year-old boy who, like many of the city's paranoid residents, believes he has been made privy to information about a pending apocalypse. Will Heller—aka Lowboy—views himself as a superhero of sorts, out to save the world from certain destruction by...losing his virginity. Lowboy turns himself loose on the city, encountering a range of colorful characters on his quest for manhood and the prevention of global annihilation.

Wray's character development is rich for such a short novel; he makes it easy to feel as if one knows the protagonist, and therefore can understand and accept his flaws. Wray's knowledge of the mental state of Lowboy—his schizophrenic condition, and the consequences of going off his meds—seems well-researched, and his vivid descriptions of the urban labyrinth—its subways and its sensations—add substance to an otherwise mediocre novel. The final tidbit revealed about Violet (Will's mother) is somewhat bland, though it seems to have been intended as a shocking twist.

Is this a groundbreaking, earth-shattering, seminal work about yet another New Yorker's apocalyptic visions and his journey to save the world? Or is it just a recounting of an adolescent paranoid-schizophrenic's quest to lose his virginity? This reviewer isn't of two minds about it. —**TATIAANA L. LAINE**

May 2009



Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Leaving Tangier*, (Penguin, 2009)

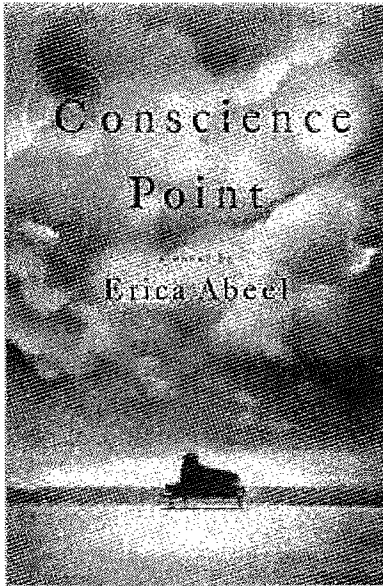
Takes us into the heart of political influence on civilian life in Morocco, exploring issues of sexuality, ambition, religion, love, and family. Azel, a young man dreaming of freedom from political oppression, meets the older Miguel and allows himself to be led to Spain as a young lover, leaving behind his fiancée. Azel's sister, Kenza, also wishes to leave the impending doom of Morocco's government, and start a new life in Spain as Miguel's legal wife. The complications that arise from their unique living arrangement destroy Azel's and Kenza's legitimate relationships.

The level of sexual liberation, particularly regarding homosexuality, may be viewed as an indicator of the modern era, although there are references to a steady presence of comfortable male homosexuality of varying degrees throughout all of the characters' lifetimes. A prominent theme of *Leaving Tangier* is casual sexual ambiguity for men, especially during youth. These male divergences in personal sexual histories are more readily accepted, and even joked about, by men than women, who either wholly deny the issue or turn a blind eye.

Aside from the political climates of the countries involved, Jelloun makes very few demarcations indicating the time period. Fashions are mentioned only a few times, in reference to traditional garb or to indicate social status. There are a few mentions of cell phones and actors, but the scarcity of pop culture references renders it a classic story of love, freedom, and all the factors hindering the pursuit thereof.

—Tatiaana L. Laine

February 2009



Erica Abeel, *Conscience Point* (Unbridled Books, 2008)

Conscience Point, Erica Abeel's fourth book, is the story of concert pianist Maddy Shaye and her tumultuous fairytale marriage to Nick Ashcroft, her former best friend's brother. Abeel adds credibility to the story by integrating an area she is well versed in, music, particularly the piano. The researched references to classical pieces and emotional connections to music add a somewhat more academic edge to a story that may otherwise be glossed over as just another novel about midlife epiphanies and turning points for women.

Abeel does, however, step into the sentimental, popular topic of realizing the meaning of motherhood, with realizations about her daughter, Laila, as well as the daughter of her longtime friend Sophie. Unanticipated subplots prevent this theme from becoming overly-sweet and overly-dominant in the book (e.g. the story of Laila's real parents, Laila's desire to work in Guatemala, and an uncomfortable pseudo-incestuous relationship between Laila and Nick).

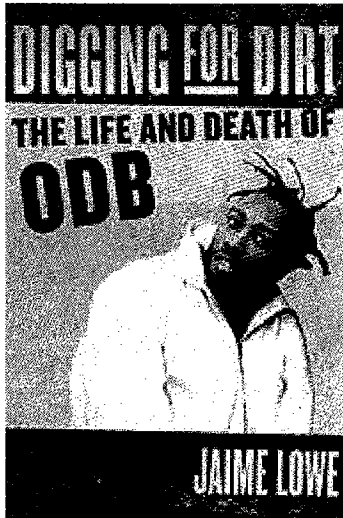
There is a certain degree of idealization of men by Maddy, in both the glimpses of their youth, as well as the present story being told. This sometimes skewed perception of human beings—males, particularly—characterizes the fairytale that Maddy falls in love

with. Almost nothing in the Ashcroft family is as it seems, as Maddy realizes during her friendship with Violet and her later relationship with Violet's brother, Nick. Their lives intertwined during a college trip to Conscience Point, the Ashcrofts's showy vacation home with crumbling foundations and a sparkling façade.

Abeel's knowledge of New York City adds another element of authenticity, and acts as a grounding force throughout this melodramatic story. Everyone loves to read about the ups and downs of NYC, its eccentric people, neighborhoods, and familiar restaurants. New Yorkers themselves are particularly drawn to this setting, as we enjoy recognizing and identifying ourselves in the backdrop.

— *Tatiaana L. Laine*

December 2008/January 2009



Jaime Lowe, *Digging for Dirt: The Life and Death of ODB*

(Faber & Faber, 2008)

Jaime Lowe's *Digging for Dirt: The Life and Death of ODB* explores the internal struggles of rugged rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard (ODB; aka Russell Jones). It is a uniquely grassroots attempt at a typical music biography. Lowe's articulate prose may be underappreciated in this genre, or even viewed as too exhaustive. Her adept use of language and well-researched information add an academic approach to a field that too often produces mass quantities of conventionally controversial reading.

This fan's account of ODB's life is an attempt to clarify some of the more disturbing facets of ODB's reputation. As such, Lowe does not include a glossy photo section insert for fan-readers who have come to expect candid shots with celebrity friends, grainy photos of amateur shows in small venues, and early childhood snapshots. To her credit, Lowe resists the urge to appeal to that side of us which craves the dirt-dishing approach of gossip magazines and shows. The book appears somewhat disorganized, however, perhaps due in part to its intense offering of information in lengthy segments and its basic, no-frills format.

Lowe is perhaps too protective of ODB at times. In some circumstances, her defense of him borders on the absurd, though it does build a substantial case in support of the theory that ODB suffered from mental illness. Interviews with friends and family affirm this

suspicion, as do references to the medical criteria of schizophrenia and other mental disorders.

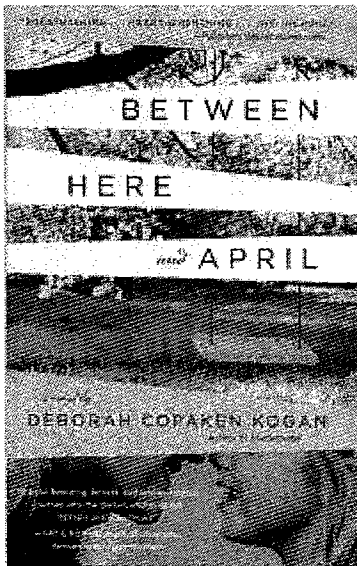
Lowe has clearly done her homework. She took the time, effort—and in some cases, risks—to meet with those in ODB's inner circle. They confirmed many of the rumors about him; his erratic behavior, his views about authority, etc. They also discussed his intelligence and dedication to his craft, sharing their fonder memories of his life. This book was written by a true admirer, not a posthumous bandwagon fan. The result is a serious attempt to set the record straight about a misunderstood record-maker.

—*Tatiaana L. Laine*

October 2008

Deborah Copaken Kogan, *Between Here and April*

(Algonquin, 2008).



Deborah Copaken Kogan's first novel, *Between Here and April*, is the story of Elizabeth Burns, a war journalist, attempting to piece together the circumstances surrounding the mysterious disappearance of a classmate, April, three decades earlier. The motivation for Burns' efforts is somewhat baffling, as she learns the basics of April's death with one trip to the library. However, Elizabeth pursues this death with family interviews, etc. Perhaps her belated realization that this horrific event required more attention than a few words in the local newspaper is an acknowledgement of how jaded we, as a society, are about these routine tragedies.

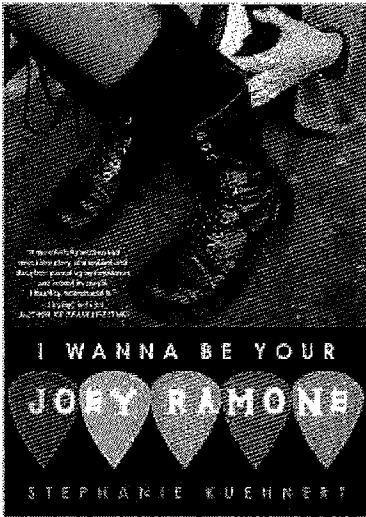
Her research intensifies her own questions about being a "good" mother and wife, as she analyzes the parenting styles of herself, her own mother, and April's mother. Kogan appears to aim for the questions any mother may have about her own efforts, and/or those of her own maternal figure. Marriage is a seemingly thick thread woven throughout the novel, yet Elizabeth and Mark's marital difficulties beat a hasty retreat without any further explanation.

Although a happily-ever-after is often anticipated in American literature, there is no requirement that all stories must neatly wrap up with a fairytale ending. This one, however, ends abruptly, after two hundred plus detailed pages. We see the story of a person's life unfold, as told through the eyes of those around her, three decades later, but to what end?

Certainly, to showcase Kogan's knowledge of photography (the salient topic of her memoir, *Shutterbabe*), war journalism (again, *Shutterbabe*), and the challenges of New York City motherhood.

—*Tatiaana Laine*

September 2008



Stephanie Kuehnert *I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone* (MTV Books, 2008)

Stephanie Kuehnert's first novel, *I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone*, showcases her passion for punk music and her knowledge of the ingredients for a successful 1990s punk rock band. Her descriptions of songs' components, influences, and resulting impact on life are intricate and authentic. Kuehnert's depiction of several drug-saturated lifestyles is also effective, though she does not go into enough detail to churn one's stomach or to glorify drug use; this is not a Chuck Palahniuk or Aleister Crowley novel.

Perhaps Kuehnert avoids crossing this boundary because this is a novel for the most recently acknowledged Young Adult subdivision, the "older young adult." This is the group whose previous generations read *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous/Beatrice Sparks), *Forever* (Judy Blume), and *Crank* (Ellen Hopkins) as stepping stones into the adult literary world. The older young adults are worldly enough to handle Kuehnert's drug references and descriptions of (often disappointing) first sexual encounters, and she tailors the exaggerated emotional outbursts for her hormone-driven readers without insulting their intelligence. *I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone*'s unexpected ending is a refreshing twist to Young Adult literature, and the juxtaposition between how Emily envisions her mother's current life and how we the readers actually view it is a testament to the willing suspension of disbelief of adolescence.

I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone deals with the period of teenage confusion about finding one's self and one's place in the world, with all the disappointing, humiliating moments we later try to forget, but perhaps should instead embrace.

Kuehnert's novel takes the issues of today's inevitably confused young adult, adds some heavy riffs, coats it in a grimy layer of beer and cigarette smoke, and leads us through the true hell of adolescence once again.

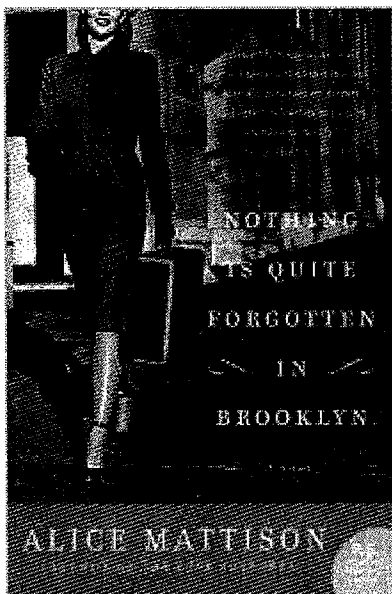
—*Tatiaana L. Laine*

July/August 2008

Alice Mattison,

Nothing is Quite Forgotten in Brooklyn

(Harper Perennial, 2008)



Alice Mattison returns with another novel, *Nothing Is Quite Forgotten in Brooklyn*, and another set of female relationships. As with her earlier *The Book Borrower: A Novel*, the book spans two time periods, fourteen years apart, with the first segment finding the main character, Constance (Con), alone in her mother's Brooklyn apartment, trapped after her purse is stolen. Con lacks the aggression, resourcefulness, and ability to think on her feet that one might expect from an urban lawyer. She wanders helplessly around the small space, curious and sympathetic toward her mother's life and relationships. She begins to uncover secrets of her mother's relationship with Marlene, her best friend, and a lifetime of extortion and manipulation. The friendship is confusing and somewhat unsettling; one begins to wonder—did Con's mother, Gert, have even more to hide from Marlene, explaining this submissive role in their friendship? Or was she as simple-minded as Marlene—and sometimes, Con—thought her to be? Mattison layers in her backstory bit by bit, character by character.

Con is a window-shopper of her own life, watching events and people pass by, without fully integrating herself. In the earlier segment of the book, she ends her marriage, and

does not put forth the effort to make changes in order to keep it intact. She also allows an assignment at work to fall apart near its completion. In the second cross-section of her life, fourteen years later, Con appears to have shown little personal growth, and must be persuaded to keep friendships active. The two looks into Con's life offer amusing stories that easily move along, but without much in-depth investigation of the characters.

Alice Mattison, a native of Brooklyn, is well aware of the intense sense of pride that Brooklynites feel for their hometown. Mattison acknowledges the tacit understanding that if you leave Brooklyn, you still claim it as your own, and no matter how long you're gone, that monstrous borough will always welcome you home with open arms.

—*Tatiaana Laine*