

Marilyn Krysl

DOING THE RIGHT THING

Edith Pearlman has charmingly described the characters in her stories as “people in peculiar circumstances aching to Do The Right Thing if only they can figure out what the right thing is. If not, they’ll at least Do Their Own Thing Right.” The necessary ambiguities that arise when we try to do right are the matter of Pearlman’s tales. The center of this book which garnered University of Pittsburgh Press’s Drue Heinz Prize for 1996 is a set of stories that coalesce around the courtship and wedding of Donna, anti-heroine who eschews wealth and privilege in favor of operating The Ladle, a soup kitchen for poor and homeless women, and her Jewish lover Raph, a psychiatrist and historian of mental illness who lectures on Heracles and “schizophrenia as seen by Ezekiel.”

“But could they live together,” Pearlman’s narrator asks, “the basement cook and the worldly scholar?” This centerpiece cycle becomes a lens through which Pearlman views the perennial phenomenon of improbable romances and their irrational loveliness. Anyone who has watched the world’s couples dallying will have noted how frequently the two seem unsuited to each other, or conversely, suited with a vengeance. Donna’s cousin Josie gleefully uses Raph’s virtues to castigate Donna for vices this cousin does not approve. Raph is “self indulgent where you are self-denying. Festive, to cut through your thundering seriousness. Able to enjoy money. Able to enjoy life!”

Aren’t lovers, more often than not, oddly misfit, so dubious in fact as lifelong partners that their liaisons seem doomed from the start? A match that results in an enduring love has come to seem either a monumental tour de force or its counterpart, the sorry compromise. And yet there they are, on their way into love or out of it, gamely ad libbing,

Vaquita and Other Stories, by Edith Pearlman, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996; 183 pages.

inventively contriving, hopefully subscribing to the show that “must go on.” It follows that of course the scholar and cook will give it a whirl.

By focusing on this unlikely couple, the author gets to play off her compelling version of pragmatic realism against the tragicomic notion of star-crossed lovers and to interrogate, with her lively and elegant wit, the attitudes implicit in both. But hers is not the merciless critique of a Weldon. Though there are elements of parody, as in the character of Josie, for instance, Pearlman is not exactly a satirist. Though she sometimes trains her focus on the outmoded or the flawed so that we may reform ourselves, Pearlman is more interested in having us attend the haphazardly inventive, even inspired manner in which her characters manage to breath new life into old paradigms. The stories in the romance cycle celebrate this human virtue, and the thrust of the cycle is wittily summed up by Josie at the wedding, imagining a toast: “To birth and death and the mess in between; might as well call it life, everybody else does.”

Along the way Pearlman introduces the engaging and memorable women—poignant, maddening, sorry, obstreperous—who frequent The Ladle. In fact the Ladle’s ladies, both those who work there and those who come for food and shelter, turn out to be as important and as devotedly attended to by their author as the lovers. The romance serves as warp into which Pearlman can weave the weft of Olive’s death, Dorothea’s construction and destruction, Bluma’s comeuppance.

This centerpiece cycle is flanked by other stories which demonstrate Pearlman’s ability to render quintessentially human moments in a wide divergence of circumstances: ethnicity, class, gender, personality. There is the cook who fattens stray slum children, possibly for the organ transplant mafia; a seven-year-old girl lost from her parents in Harvard Square; a husband obsessively jealous without cause; the Jewish father of a gay son; the son who deals with the end of an affair by traveling to Central America and adopting an orphan; an expat Greek radio commentator gathering material for her atmospheric commentaries from pillowtalk; a dying historian of Cortez’ conquest of the Americas and this historian’s young nurse, a red haired Malinche.

Most charming of all is Vaquita, star of the title story, also known as Señora Perera, Polish emigré who escaped the Nazis by hiding for a

year in a peasant's barn with a cow, now become minister of health in a nameless Latin American republic where revolution is the "national pastime." The cow is not incidental but an occasion for Pearlman to note life's little and not so little ironies. For the nation is in disarray. What's happening? The minister's assistant replies: ". . . unrest. . . . Otherwise, the usual. Undernourishment. Malnourishment. Crop failures. Overfecundity." It is Señora Perera's hope to lure her adopted nation back to a stable prosperity by coaxing new mothers to give up packaged formula. "Lactation had controlled fertility for centuries, had kept population numbers steady."

"Breast-feeding," she barked, unsmiling, during the failed campaign against the formula companies. They called her La Vaca—The Cow.

Along the way readers are treated to Pearlman's wit as her eye pans the story's space.

And so, on the ride home, the minister . . . was free to smell the diesel odor of the center of the city, the eucalyptus of the park, the fetidity of the river, the thick citrus stink of the remains of that day's open market, and finally the hibiscus scent of the low hills.

And there is occasion for Vaquita's lover to utter one of those flamboyant speeches Pearlman uses to winning comic effect.

You have no children to love, and you have a husband not worth loving, and you don't love me anymore because my voice is cracking and my belly sags. So you love my land, which I at least have the sense to hate. You love the oily generals. The aristocrats scratching themselves. The intellectuals snoring through concerts. The revolutionaries in undershirts. The parrots, even! You are besotted!

When by chance Señora Perera meets a young Indian mother nursing her baby in the jungle, Pearlman is at her best.

With a clinician's calm Señora Perera saw herself through the Indian girl's eyes. Not a grandmother, for grandmothers did not have red hair. Not a soldier, for soldiers did not wear skirts. Not a smuggler, for smugglers had ingratiating manners. Not a priest, for priests wore combat fatigues and gave out cigarettes; and not a journalist, for journalists piously nodded. She could not be a diety; deities radiated light. She must then be a witch.

Witches have authority, Pearlman reminds us, and the charming and admirable Vaquita rises above her tenuous circumstances to perform an irrational, impulsive and exquisite miracle. This is a story that shimmers, lyrically. For the warp and weft of that pragmatic realism in which Pearlman's characters negotiate the planet's Macchu Picchus, garbage dumps, and the mess in between, becomes transformed by the protagonist's act.

Pearlman's imagination is global rather than suburban, and her vision of humanity planetary rather than parochial. In her hands humor and parody focus not on the deterioration of older social values but on the ingenious, creatrix spinning out of new ones. However odd life's individual instances may be, Pearlman honors that instance with truth and a mirthful wink, casting on the world a level yet kindly eye. Rosellen Brown, judge for the Prize, honors Pearlman's "generous intelligence," and accurately notes that the stories' characters "represent civilized virtues and civilized vices, the best and worst of us, only much improved by Pearlman's insight and wit." Generous intelligence, insight and wit are indeed Pearlman's virtues. And I am charmed, and hard put to discover her vices.