

The Serious Business of Entertainment

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

The Bones of Garbo, by Trudy Lewis. Ohio State University Press, 2003.

In a 1980s interview, Czech novelist Milan Kundera recounted his amazement that in France (where he'd recently moved) the concept of entertainment—*divertissement*—was held in scorn. To Kundera, entertainment was not something to deride, and literature had every right to entertain.

Divertissement is an essential component in Trudy Lewis' recent collection of 10 stories, *The Bones of Garbo* (winner of the Sandstone Prize in Short Fiction). Lewis is a deliciously original stylist, and her short fiction has as much in common with performance art as traditional storytelling. With show-stopping humor (much like Grace Paley and Kate Wheeler before her), Lewis opens a window and freshens the room; this is writing with *chutzpah*.

Not one female urge, body region or activity is overlooked in this collection. Evocative smells abound. In Lewis country, women are sensual, sexual, humorous, imperfect (and know it) and in pain. Linguistic bravura so often cloaks pain in these stories that you begin to look for it as if it were a sour cherry buried deep in a seven-layer cake.

In the most heart-wrenching story, "A Diller, A Daughter," Maisy opens her lament to her absent daughter: "Your first word was 'ma,' and ever since then you've been using it against me." What unfolds is a mother's sorrow so embroidered in wit that you almost miss the implied abuse at its core. Another, "The Marijuana Tree," looks at a long-married couple whose Christmas plans are confounded not only by hilarious gender differences and an unplanned surgery, but also by a holiday "tree" Denise is convinced is a tumbleweed.

In the intriguing "Geographic Tongue," two sisters confront each

other on the battlefield of fertility: One sister perhaps selfishly waits while the other adopts foreign infants to salve her shortcomings. Meanwhile, the experimental title story juxtaposes quotes from Greta Garbo's career against the anguished experiences of two teenage girls involved in a school play. The effect is startling.

The last story, "Evacuation Route," is so compressed it leaves the reader wanting more. "Margie was one of the lucky ones who had regular orgasms, and with her husband, too." What Margie also has are "hallucinations" that must be shared, a life too small to contain her, in a town irradiated by a nuclear power plant. In spite of its brief span, the story ends on such a poignant and lyrical note that it begs to be reread slowly.

Not all the stories fully satisfy: metaphors sail over the top; similes stack up, or an experimental structure doesn't pan out. On occasion, a story line feels forced, as in the case of one tempest in a teapot involving pregnancy. Figurative excess may, in fact, be her most consistent flaw. However, no description can convey the arc of a Lewis story, because the real subject of her fiction is language.

Such an unconventional voice—daring and droll—grabs our attention, but there's a hazard here. Any Lewis story would stand out in a crowd. Reading a collection of such demanding fiction, straight through, is like gorging on dessert; we could fail to savor some individual stories.

The Bones of Garbo reminds us that *divertissement* is essential to literary health and not a sidebar. Language in the right hands is a glorious plaything.