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## A Midwest with Layers: Jenny Robertson's *Hoist House*

Jenny Robertson. *Hoist House*. Stevens Point: Cornerstone Press, 2023. Pp. 208. \$24.95. Paperback.

Jenny Robertson's story "Ground Truth" appeared in SCR 52.2.

Let me just get this out of the way: I know Jenny Robertson AND I like her. I also am very certain that I would have enjoyed reading her newest book, *Hoist House*, whether or not this was true. Like the author, the writing is generous in every way, and I felt deliciously immersed in this delightful and eclectic collection of stories and a novella.

The book begins with several short stories, and each one functions completely as its own planet in the book's solar system. They do not need each other in any way, and if they were not all united by the landscape of the Midwest and the exquisiteness of the writing, they would seem very distinct from one another indeed. This is a strength of the collection, I think, as each story features a fresh world, tone, and set of characters. These characters often seem to lean momentarily toward a Sherwood Anderson tradition of the Midwest: with names like Cher Bébé, Maggie Pancake, and Vermilion Rex we wonder if they are Anderson's grotesques, or caricatures of themselves. This may be true of Vermilion Rex who, in a flash piece, reinvents himself fresh out of jail with a kind of masculine excessiveness. But Cher and Maggie are so fully rendered that they both broke my heart. In the first story of the collection, "Sex-O-Rama, 1993," Cher works his job at a club while his father dies in a faraway state. Cher is a charismatic performer and a mother bird for a young drunk woman all while waiting for his mother to call so he can say his final words to his father. Any attempt to read the grotesque into the story is immediately thwarted by Robertson's visceral details of the scene: "When the club was busy, they couldn't hear each other, so they used industrial glowsticks as signals, like airport runway marshals guiding a plane. White meant refill toilet paper. Yellow meant mop up piss or puke. Blue

was for O.D. Red for fight. The speed of the flash signaled the intensity of the problem, and the closest hands were expected to respond" (2). The world of the club becomes a sure thing, and Cher's tenderness in this chaotic setting still somehow becomes the loudest part of the story.

Robertson, it seems, has an uncanny ability to converse with and yet resist the absurd. For example, in the story "The Triumphant Return of Maggie Pancake," a woman is back home visiting her parents on what was to be her wedding weekend. It was to be a circus-themed wedding before her groom, a clown, leaves her for another clown named Sunshine. While there is humor in the image of Maggie waiting for a clown car that stops coming home, Maggie's depth of character doesn't allow the reader to flatten Maggie or her experience in any way. Maggie is deeply loved by doting parents, she's disappointed, and she's still raw with grief over the death of a childhood friend. The result is a story that's layered and rich, and one that demonstrates Robertson's talents as a writer.

A few of these initial stories are shorter, and darker. They add a shadow to the book for this reader and while they do add dimension, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to go into these dark corners. There's a man sneaking into a child's bedroom, and Vermilion Rex commits bestiality: both moments left me aesthetically unsettled. However, these stories do let us know that Robertson is a bold writer who doesn't shy away from the gothic understorey—this knowledge, in turn, informs choices she makes in other pieces.

The stories and their variety add to the collection's success partly because all the various notes played lead up to the crescendo that is the titular novella, "Hoist House." I am a huge fan of novellas, and their power to efficiently hand us a world and briefly show us how that world turns. "Hoist House" did not disappoint. Set in Minnesota in the early 1920's, the book is narrated by Sadie, a daughter of Finnish immigrants. Sadie tells us of her older brother, Karl, her mining father Isa and his best friend Einar, her youngest sister, Lumi, and her mother, Kati. She describes coming of age, the tension in the house as both her and her older brother mature, and the place Finns hold in the larger community (one of second-class citizens). Each character's desire is painted in deft strokes: Kati wants to protect her children; Isa wants to give them the American dream and pay for his new car; Karl wants more than to work in the mines; and Sadie wants something of her own—an identity, a security, a place in the larger community. This desire leads her to commit a transgression early in the story and, while I won't spoil it for you, it's a sin both large and small, and Sadie navigates the consequences quietly and in ways that seem to me complex and original.

While it's tempting to call the novella "historical fiction," I feel that would diminish Robertson's extraordinary ability in world-building. Robertson's attention to the minute, and to the natural landscape, go beyond just being well-researched. Take for example this

description of July: "As I weeded the garden, a hummingbird dipped its beak into a radish flower, its deep green body dropping to a bent fish tail" (66). Or, one of my favorite moments, when the youngest child is painting with natural paints: "Her favorite paint was beet blood, deep pink like rabbit muscle freshly freed from its fur. She waited at my shoulder for the cooked beets to lose their skins, their bodies slabbed by my knife. Her tin painting cup, her old baby cup stamped with Humpty Dumpty before his fall, caught the beets' dark liquid as it ran from the oak board..." (145).

The writing itself is so strong, I frequently stopped to reread a line like this one: "Mummo always said the devil was real, but where is hell, anyway? Men have been digging deep in the earth a long time and all they find is iron and water" (175). This world, and these characters, feel much more than historical; they feel as if they are breathing with us. What's more, Sadie and Karl's teenage angst has such universality despite their different lives and singular characters that I found myself remembering more from my own coming of age. This story will stay with me for a long time, I am sure.

In summary, *Hoist House* is a delightful read, and Robertson is a powerful writer. Her details have teeth that sink in and stick, and her sense of story leaves the reader more than sated.