

First-time writers test the waters with outstanding collections

BY HARVEY FREEDENBERG

Despite its honored tradition, the short story remains the orphan of the literary world. Judging by these striking debut collections, there's hope that an adventuresome group of writers will help rejuvenate the form and attract a new generation of readers.

Extraordinary teenage tales

Karen Russell's startlingly original collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* (Knopf, \$22, 272 pages, ISBN 9780307263988), features graceful and seductive prose that transports the reader into surreal and yet utterly plausible realms. Many of the stories are set in Russell's native region of South Florida, but it's not the familiar territory of high-rise condos and golf courses—it's a world of alligator-infested swamps, ghosts and spectral moonlight. The adolescents who people these mostly first-person tales aren't hanging out at the mall or gabbing on cell phones. Instead, they seek their identity in a kind of edge world that features such exotic venues as the girls' home of the title story.

Highlights include "Haunting Olivia," in which two young brothers engage in a daring nocturnal diving exercise searching for their drowned sister, and "from Children's Reminiscences of the Westward Migration," a one-of-a-kind story of filial devotion. In every story, Russell demonstrates a mastery of her craft, an achievement made even more compelling by the fact that she's only 24 years old.

Welcome to an uneasy future

Ryan Boudinot boasts an MFA from Bennington College and works as an editor at Amazon.com. His first short story collection combines his literary sensibility with a keen eye for the oddities of contemporary American society.

The stories in *The Littlest Hitler* (Counterpoint, \$22, 214 pages, ISBN 9781582433578) veer between those set in a recognizable world and others that take place in some dystopian future. The former category features "Sex and Relationships," where the tensions between two

childless young couples, friendly on the surface, are peeled back until a shocking secret is revealed. The latter includes "The Sales Team," which involves a group of murderous salesmen whose only product seems to be a talent for terrorizing their customers. In the title story, a fourth-grader appears for the school Halloween party dressed as Adolf Hitler, only to be confronted by a classmate dressed as Anne Frank. Boudinot's gift lies in his ability to move beyond the shock value of the story's

premise to offer a tender account of a single father's fumbling effort to help his son.

Fans of the short fiction of George Saunders will find a kindred spirit in the writing of Boudinot and they'll no doubt be waiting eagerly for more of his offbeat take on American life.

Fundamentals of fiction

Home Remedies (Harcourt, \$14, 240 pages, ISBN 9780156030755), by Angela Pneuman, offers eight stories that revolve around a unifying theme: the struggle of girls and young women raised in fundamentalist Christian families to resolve the tension between their upbringing and the values of contemporary society. Despite their brevity, many of the stories have an almost novelistic depth, a quality best illustrated by "The Bell

Ringer," the story of a troubled young woman's descent into madness as she mans a Salvation Army bucket in the depths of a Minnesota winter.

Not all of Pneuman's stories offer such unremitting bleakness. "All Saints Day" is the often hilarious tale of two sisters' efforts to enliven a Biblical costume party at the church that's auditioning their father for its pulpit. Others, such as "The Beachcomber," portray the sexual awakening of young girls in sometimes startling, but sympathetic terms.

Pneuman's view of fundamentalist religion is frank but not unfair. It will be revealing to see her apply her talents to other subject matter as her career unfolds.

History's horror

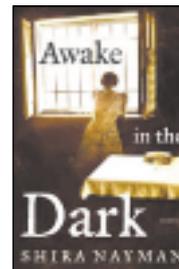
Shira Nayman's *Awake in the Dark* (Scribner, \$24, 304 pages, ISBN 9780743292689), a collection of three stories and a novella, is another work focusing tightly on a single theme: the Holocaust and the way in which the harrowing events of that time ripple through the lives of her characters, both past and present, to indelibly shape their identities.

Nayman is adept at reversing the reader's expecta-

tions as her characters grapple with the weight of the burden history has placed upon them. In the first two stories, "The House on Kronenstrasse" and "The Porcelain Monkey," the protagonists make startling discoveries about their parents that transform the way each looks at the world. In "Dark Urgings of the Blood," the novella that makes up half the book, Nayman brings to bear her training as a clinical psychologist to tell the haunting story of a psychiatrist and her patient, unknowingly linked by tragic circumstances.

As befits their subject matter, these four stories are dark and often troubling. Nayman's talent lies in her ability to illuminate the essential humanity at their core. ♥

Harvey Freedenberg writes from Pennsylvania.



Big names, tiny packages

It's not only newcomers who are drawn to the short story form—some of literature's brightest stars have recently released new collections.

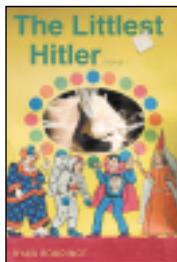
- **Mothers and Sons** by Colm Tóibín (Scribner, \$24, 288 pages, ISBN 9781416534655). Irish author Tóibín has been on the Booker Prize shortlist twice, and this new collection, with its tight focus on the mother/son relationship, doesn't disappoint.

- **The Lives of Rocks** by Rick Bass (Houghton Mifflin, \$23, 224 pages, ISBN 9780618596744). Bass started his career with the short story collection *The Watch*; 22 books later he returns with a third set of tales told in his famously economic language.

- **Severance** by Robert Olen Butler (Chronicle, \$22.95, 304 pages, ISBN 9780811856143). Pulitzer Prize winner Butler has written an unusual, if a bit grotesque, set of 62 stories told from the perspective of beheaded individuals real and imagined.

- **Moral Disorder** by Margaret Atwood (Nan A. Talese, \$23.95, 240 pages, ISBN 9780385503846). Atwood's brilliant collection is novel-like in scope as it goes back and forth through the life of a Canadian woman whose existence is as mundane as it is universal—and enlightening. ♥

—TRISHA PING



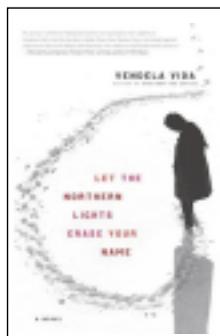
FICTION

The sins of the mothers

BY MEREDITH MCGUIRE

At the beginning of Vendela Vida's second novel, *Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name*, Clarissa Iverton's mother informs her that she was named Clarissa in order to rewrite history. Though it will be years until Clarissa fully comprehends this statement, Vida explores whether such a revision is, in fact, possible. Throughout the novel, she poses the question: Can we escape who we are? Her answer, quite simply, is yes, we can.

From the time her mother forever turns her back on her family during a holiday shopping trip to the mall, Clarissa views herself as the opposite of her mother's daughter. After years of trying to bask in the fickle spotlight of her mother's love, with her mother's absence Clarissa becomes caring, responsible and trustworthy—in short, the antithesis of her mother. This idea, however, is abruptly shattered after the unexpected death of her father and a grief-fueled



Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name

By Vendela Vida
Ecco, \$23.95, 240 pages
ISBN 9780060828370

trip to Lapland. In the outer reaches of the Arctic Circle, she discovers not only that she shares similarities with her mother, but also that their lives are eerily parallel. Confronted with knowledge concerning both her mother's past and her own, Clarissa is faced with the option of correcting the mistakes of both. In doing so, she realizes that the sins of her mother are surprisingly easy to replicate—or to avenge. It is up to Clarissa, however, to determine which path to choose.

An editor of the literary magazine *The Believer* (and wife of novelist and *McSweeney's* editor Dave Eggers), Vida has a clean and crisp writing style, almost staccato in the way it punctuates details and illuminates emotions. As she sweeps through different stages of Clarissa's life, Vida changes the narrative style, capturing both the warped logic of a teenager and the jaded attitude of an almost-30 woman with equal skill. Her language does not compete with her story, yet it is not rare to pause over a particularly well-crafted phrase or description and turn it over in one's mind with delighted approval. Through the stories of Clarissa and her mother, Vida explores the notion of how much of our past we are able to escape and how much we are burdened to repeat. ♥

Meredith McGuire writes from San Francisco.