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The Knitting Circle (review)

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Ellen tends to think in absolutes, and *The Bird Woman's* greatest strength is its portrayal of the cultural division between Protestants and Catholics, North and South. Hardie shows how politics affects everyone in Northern Ireland, how the political climate encourages a self-imposed divide.

"Up there we were too afraid to talk face to face, so silence seemed the only way. We talked among ourselves of course, told one another what *they* thought, what *they* were after, we stoked our own fears till they blazed up and licked at the rafters. For the rest, we left it to the politicians who defended and accused from the safety of the television studios. We listened to our own and turned away from theirs, unable to hear, deafened by the anger that rose in our blood and beat in our eyes before they were through the first sentence."

In the Republic, Ellen isolates herself from her former life. She has left her judgmental mother. Her family knows little of her life beyond her address, and they have never seen her children. Although Ellen feels that her break from her past is complete, her unwanted healing ability seems to arise from the denial of her clairvoyance. Hardie describes Ellen's abilities with an unsentimental physicality—there's no melting into showy, new-age swooning. But Ellen is not truly in control of her gifts. She's an angry woman, whose abilities work even when she does not want to engage those who come to her for help.

The novel opens with Ellen being summoned home because her mother is dying. Initially she doesn't want to go, but the novel ends a year after her mother's death, and in the transit of the novel, we have come a long way with Ellen. When she finally returns to the North, she learns a family secret that disarms her previous assumptions and sets her on the path to an uneasy acceptance of her own failings and those of others, an unsentimental and startling acceptance of the world as it is. (EO)



The Knitting Circle

By Ann Hood

W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 346 pp., \$24.95

In the last several years, grief has become a recurring theme in the literary world. In memoir, Joan Didion wrote about her husband's death in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and Calvin Trillin recently memorialized his wife in *About Alice*. In fiction, Cheryl Strayed wrote her first novel, *Torch*, about the devastation of losing a mother. Now Ann

Hood, best known for her short stories, has written *The Knitting Circle*, a novel about a mother who has lost her five-year-old daughter, suddenly and tragically, to meningitis.

Both Strayed and Hood drew on their own experience for their novels. In 2002, Hood's five-year-old daughter, Grace, died suddenly from a virulent form of strep. Of that experience, Hood has written, "In this time of most enormous grief after Grace died, there is no day or night. There is just loss."

We encounter *The Knitting Circle's* Mary Baxter at a similar place, shortly after the death of her five-year-old daughter, Stella. Since her loss, Mary has been unable to return to any semblance of her life, either as a wife or as a writer for a small Providence newspaper. "What you need," her mother tells her, "is to learn to knit."

Simply because she finds herself incapable of anything else, Mary reluctantly joins a local knitting circle. There, she meets Scarlet, Lulu, Beth, Harriet, Alice and Ellen. As they spend time together talking and knitting, Mary discovers that each of the women has come to the circle with her own story of loss, using knitting as therapy when everything else has failed. As Scarlet knowingly tells Mary in the beginning, "That's how it is at first. You knit to save your life." Over time, inspired by the honesty and courage of these women, Mary is finally able to tell them her own story and begin recovering, however slowly and imperfectly.

Centered so fully on Mary's paralyzing grief, the story is a difficult one to dramatize. Hood uses Mary's knitting circle to enliven the narrative, dedicating entire chapters to each woman's story. While intriguing and rich in detail, these stories are mostly vignettes. They are also told through conversation, which often doesn't work. For example, when Alice reaches a moment of tension in her own story, she tells Mary, "The air conditioner came on noisily, as if it had to work very hard to send out cold air." Such detail works fine in straight narrative but sounds improbable coming out a character's mouth.

With her last short-story collection, *An Ornithologist's Guide to Life*, Hood established herself as a talented writer. Her stories often create an uncomfortable sense that, despite all appearances, everyone has secrets. In one story in that collection, "The Rightness of Things," Rachel, a young mother, learns to reshape her life after her husband has left her, having lost her original vision of how things would always be.

The Knitting Circle continues to explore this question of how a woman who has become one type of person—in this case a mother—is suddenly

forced by a loss to start anew. As Mary's husband, Dylan, says to her, "Without Stella, it's hard to remember who we are." Hood shows us how Mary starts over—though she does so just barely, and only through the friendship of her knitting circle.

As so many writers have recently shown, the emotion of deep loss is enormously compelling when translated into art. Yet it is difficult to write about one's own personal grief while still maintaining the necessary distance to craft a piece of art. Though her novel lacks the toughness, independence and imagination that characterize her short stories, Hood has done remarkably well in distancing her experience from *The Knitting Circle*, allowing her personal story to become the stories of others. (LH)



Stray

By Sheri Joseph

MacAdam/Cage, 2007, 444 pp., \$25

Sheri Joseph's debut novel, *Stray*, is a fearless examination of the myriad deeds and relationships love inhabits—from charitable acts of kindness, to marriage, to sexual liaisons so unlikely that they appear to make no sense.

A lover's triangle of two men and a woman would usually be thought to consist of a wife cheating on her husband, a woman with two lovers. In *Stray*, it's the husband who has two lovers—one his wife and the other his boyfriend. The husband is a thirty-year-old musician just beginning to settle into married life. His wife, Maggie, is a Mennonite lawyer of unshakable faith in her place in the world, and the lover is a college student surviving on the tired kindness of an ailing professor. It is more than the seductive storyline that drives this novel, though; it is the unrelenting mess created when good intentions overlap again and again with unavoidable physical entanglement.

Joseph's first book, *Bear Me Safely Over*, is a cycle of stories that features two of the characters from *Stray*, Kent and Paul, and describes the awkward genesis of their relationship. Love and how it blends and mutes the boundaries between straight and gay are themes of both books. In *Stray*, however, there are few traces of previous characters' homophobia; rather, what occurs is a manifestation of genuine compassion through the portrayal of modern-day Mennonites and the quiet tolerance evident in daily private acts of kindness and pacifism.