

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Supernatural Rescues In a Flawed World

By JANET MASLIN

It's not that Gina Ochsner tells ghost stories. It's just that strange, occult phenomena crop up in her narratives at pivotal moments. Whether they are set in Eastern Europe or the Pacific Northwest, the tales in her second collection drift into an invitingly macabre fantasyland where desires are thwarted and tempers frayed.

Ms. Ochsner's last-minute redemptions and miracles (nearly every one of her stories ends on such a note) fail to dent the otherworldly misanthropy that gives her work its vigor.

Consider "The Hurler," one of the standout stories in this latest collection, "People I Wanted to Be." It begins with one of Ms. Ochsner's bizarre yet mundane premises, and in this case that means throwing things. The main character introduces this gambit as follows: "On cloudless days, I love to watch the smooth flights of couches and tables. Dead animals are good too, their feet and tails, wings and fins stiff and un-

People I Wanted to Be

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bending as they clip the top of my laurel hedge, their bodies sailing into the abandoned dump on the other side of my fence. It's beautiful in the sense that getting rid of the trash can be beautiful and satisfying."

The couch-tossing is cathartic in ways that might serve another writer as a finale. But Ms. Ochsner likes to begin her fiction where ordinary stories might end. Over and over in this brightly eccentric collection, she dives gracefully off the deep end and heads for the realm of the unpredictable. So the woman who likes to throw things soon goes into business, placing a classified ad that reads: "Hurler for hire. Cast your cares into nearby lot. No load too heavy." This

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leads her to the jettisoning of human hearts: "castoffs, second-stringers, damaged goods, the kind of hearts people were better off without." In a moment of eerie uplift, one such heart will turn out to be her own.

This collection's central concerns are childlessness, wretched but intense love affairs ("pockmarks in the walls spoke of her many attempts to impale me with her shoes"), bizarrely symbolic pets and mortality. But not even death dims Ms. Ochsner's ghoulish inventiveness. In "Halves of a Whole" she writes of Lucy and Estera, twins whose parents brought them up to be undertakers. "Presentation is everything" was the family motto.

"After high school the girls would go to embalming school and meet nice boys, possibly brothers — maybe even twins," Ms. Ochsner writes about the parents' grand design for their daughters. "Well schooled in grief management, end-of-life financial planning, the psychology of casket salesmanship, their husbands would have winsome smiles — sincere, but not overly earnest. They'd have children who would inherit the mysterious gift of knowing when to



Robbie McClaran

Gina Ochsner

nudge a box of tissues closer to an elbow, when to crack a window, offer iced tea, or leave the room quietly." Not surprisingly, plans this careful run afoul of fate.

An equally mordant story, "When the Dark Is Light Enough," unfolds in a morgue. And the condition of being dead does not necessarily limit

characters' participation in the action. An old woman named Lusya silently observes the activities of Karen and Nick, forensic investigators, as they try to determine the details of Lusya's murder. Since the victim has no idea who killed her, she is naturally very curious about the investigators' discoveries. Eventually, Ms. Ochsner tacks on a sudden, transcendent ending that is prettier and less honest than the spookier stuff leading up to it.

Most of these stories have appeared previously, in publications ranging from *The Kenyon Review* to *Fiddlehead* and *Prairie Schooner*. "The Fractious South" appeared in *The New Yorker* and is more frankly topical than any of the others. Its characters are Russians, its narrator a young man who loves to fish and was 7 "when the trouble in Afghanistan heated up"; he will come of military age during the story. He will also find "the first girl who didn't say no" to marry. "I with my eyes set a little too close for anyone's comfort and Voya with her furry eyebrows and jagged teeth — we were a perfect match," he writes. "We even had passion, I for the fish and she for American cosmetics, but when she was ovulating, bless her, she had some passion for me."

Although *Chechnya* interests this young man mostly for its trout, it too reaches crisis proportions during the story. Ms. Ochsner does not address these political realities head-on; instead, she reels them in with metaphorical thoughts about fish and procreation. And this time her final grace notes really do have the de-

Musings on wretched loves, childless angst and mortality.

sired effect, elevating a whimsical tale to serious clarity. The narrator suddenly glimpses the long view of history through a haze of eroticism and dread.

"With the first kiss I was transported to the days before I knew what a war was," Ms. Ochsner writes. "With the second kiss I was returned to the red passion of our youth, and with the third to renewal, to being brought back from the dead, remade from mud." At moments like this, she has her own power to transport.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK