

AMERICAN WIVES

Beth Helms

University of Iowa Press (\$15.95)

by Amy Eden Jollymore

In her award-winning debut collection, Beth Helms offers up a cohesive collection of portraits of American couples, then breaks them apart and examines the cracks and the fissures in those relationships. The stories juxtapose the awful and the tender in such a way that *truth*, in all its complexity, resounds loudest.

Helms's eye for detail and her descriptions of characters' worlds are finely etched—sharply but delicately—throughout her narratives. The title story vividly depicts a military wife who must get used “to her husband’s schedule and the sunless apartment, to the landscape of a new foreign city. Baghdad had a strange, concrete architecture; flat squatting facades dotted with wild touches—an orange balcony, an avocado railing. Frankfurt is a grim, industrial city, but still offers sudden surprises—a cobbled street, a gingerbread trim.” But “American Wives” is also a meditation on how revisionist memory softens the discomforts of the past. “As though there had not been the incident with the high chair, or the war and the evacuation in the middle of the night. . . . When Mary Frances remembers these things, she regrets the conversations she’s just had over drinks in someone’s living room—the telling, lovely and false.”

The stories of *American Wives* all begin fully engaged, starting in places where the reader is invited to sit, or wander, alongside the narrator. “Antique Map Collecting,” the story of a woman unable to remember the important details of her daily life—what her husband likes to eat, where she misplaced the key to the liquor cabinet, and why her husband and their daughter do not speak to one another—begins in a deli, where “Louisa faces a problem. Lying on the other side of the sloping glass window at the market is a trivial, everyday decision—salmon or filet of beef.” As the story proceeds, the main character and the reader are deluded *together*, sliding along the downward spiral of the character’s situation, to discover, side by side, the unfortunate, undeniable reality that the woman is distraught, desperate. This spiraling structure works to lessen the sting of the ultimate sadness of the story; it does not, however, revoke it.

It is hard not to think of Alice Munro when reading Helms’s work—especially in the case of “The Confines of Civilized Behavior.” The story’s depths are surprising; as Helms pushes us into the deep end of the narrative, we begin to swim inside the characters’ dense lives, suddenly familiar with their needs:

On weekend mornings like this one, Simon wants sex. Without it he will be grumpy and easily offended; the day will be ruined. I lay the paper down on the bed and hear the house begin to come alive below us: the noise of Francie grinding beans for coffee, the girls’ morning demands—cereal, fruit, chocolate, help with outfits and towels and tooth-brushing—the dog whining to be let outside. I’m jealous of her sunny carefree mornings, the simple needs of children and dogs.



And Helms’s talents extend beyond lush word landscaping and psychological insight. Readers will not find that she has secretly or suddenly inserted herself into the stories, making self-serving cameos like a film director, or that her narrative voice is anything but calm and assured. Her narration is matter-of-fact: characters may not always know themselves, but readers always have a privileged view. It’s a precise and revealing view, as in “Collected Stories”: “When he first fell in love with Ella, he was married. He got his divorce to be with her, a thing he believes she should appreciate more than she does.” Helms knows her characters, and she allows them to remind us that even the smallest everyday event is imbued with significance.

As “Collected Stories” unfolds, the reader finds that the story isn’t tethered to continuous action so much as to the characters’ obsessions, worries, regrets, and fantasies, and all drive the story forward at full-throttle. Helms has such firm control over the “now” in her stories that it allows her to wind and flow, with reader in hand, through the lives of her characters just as they themselves might experience their own—thinking back to yesterday, regarding the morning in light of the day’s events, understanding finally, the significance of an afternoon ten years past. In Helms’s hand, the reader is not lost but, rather, given a 360° view. Like the houses on a postcard that “rise vertically from the glossy paper and take on a shape, an impression, of something familiar,” these stories offer a haunting snapshot of domestic worlds that we all fear to know. ♦

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