

Where Does the Truth Lie?

By R.M. Kinder

Book Review

The Liars' Asylum: Stories, by Jacob M. Appel,
Black Lawrence Press, 2017.



“What planet do you live on?” asks the wife in Jacob M. Appel’s “Good Enough for Guppies,” and the husband responds, “the one with Saul Bellow and Tony Randall and lots of other people.” That’s more than a fair hint of the world inside *The Liars’ Asylum*, a collection of eight totally engaging, beautifully laced stories. Appel has already won numerous awards for his fiction, and his credentials as a writer, bioethicist, psychiatrist, and social critic raise expectations for bold, liberally liberal work. Indeed, we get a blend of superb storytelling and ethical probing, the product of a writer who is fond of humanity and life and uses his broad view and many talents to share stories that are funny—almost ribald at times—touching, inspirational, tender, frightening, sad, and always thought provoking.

The setting and point-of-view establish a comfortable but deceptive nostalgia. The characters are from Jewish-American families, affluent or once affluent, in post-World War II, eastern U.S.A. The incidents will thus be in the past, a shared history to the reader, and probably familiar through the works of writers such as Cheever and Updike. The point-of-view is first person, a different narrator for each piece, promising variety but in a traditional form. The expectation raised is a comfort zone and a steady seat for the reader. But it’s a false nostalgia because the issues—e.g., gender identity and roles—are still very much with us, and nothing in the work is predictable or even steady.

Strong characters are usually the heart of winning fiction, and though intellectual play has a huge part here—equal, perhaps—Appel’s characters are memorable. There’s not a real villain in the

work (a minor bigot role serves as exception). Some poor behavior, yes, but circumstances excuse or explain that. No one is truly wicked and nothing is ugly or distasteful for long. They struggle between the urge to do what they wish or what they should, and to define both. They sacrifice in some way, and whether the particular story is comic or somber, the sacrifice is genuine. A physician sells a practice to fund a treatment center for kids; an aunt foregoes a career; and a fourteen-year-old offers a kidney. These are touching acts, and they point to a loving community. Ugliness is kept small, manageable, like the devil.

The Liars' Asylum could be read as a satire from beginning to end, but that wouldn't answer for all its parts. The story titles suggest satire or paradox—or riddles. Here are a tantalizing few: "Bait and Switch," "When Love Was an Angel's Kidney," "Picklocks in Oblivion," and, of course, "Liars' Asylum." The situations that unfold are on the one hand ludicrous, and on the other deadly serious.

One story in particular, "The Summer of Interrogatory Subversion," provides a key to the book's layered and woven structure: As foreplay to sexual intercourse, a man engages his potential partner in ethical questioning, a way "to ask questions" he says "that 'cannot be asked,' and then attempt to defend the answer." To discover the underlying pattern is a great pleasure and a gift of this collection. The stories satisfy like traditional fiction yet stir the mind, gently and with good humor, to consider controversial issues, to debate with oneself. This is an important, serious, but upbeat and wonderful book.