

MY NEW AMERICAN LIFE



By Francine Prose, Harper, \$25.99, 320 pages
ISBN 9780061713767, eBook available

COMING TO THE “NEW” AMERICA



REVIEW BY KELLY BLEWETT

There has been a lot written about the Bush and Cheney days, but rarely from such an amusing perspective as in Francine Prose’s *My New American Life*. In the novel, Lula, a 26-year-old Albanian living in New York City with an expiring tourist visa, finds work as a nanny for the son of a Wall Street executive. She mainly spends her days on the couch in the family’s suburban New Jersey home, contemplating the supposed differences between her new country and her homeland—and the two are more alike than initially meets the eye.

The novel is worth the read for chapter three’s brilliant dinner scene alone. Lula, newly granted access to the next rung on the immigration ladder, celebrates her status with a meal in Manhattan. As her boss tells her, to avoid going out to eat on someone else’s dime would be “deeply un-American.” After debating what to wear, Lula settles on a new skirt and vetoes “the knee socks that would have nudged her outfit over the line from college girl to role-playing, escort-service college girl.” She enjoys certain privileges for this dinner—sitting up front in the car on

the way there, unlimited wine and the opportunity to discuss her budding interest in writing short fiction. “To Lula and her new American life!” the party toasts. But the dinner—like her new life—is far from perfect. Lula is relegated to the same side of the table as the children, where she sucks down too much wine, realizes that her benefactors are being haplessly swindled by the kitchen staff and then rides home in the backseat. The rest of the novel, like this scene, revels in Lula’s unique, sardonic and totally refreshing perspective. Lula, we see, is often more aware of U.S. dynamics than the citizens who have lived there for decades.

“She wanted it all,” Prose writes of Lula, “the green card, the citizenship, the vote. The income taxes! The Constitutional rights. Two cars in the garage. The garage.” In this post-9/11 world, the road to realizing these desires has no map. But in *My New American Life*, Lula carves her own way in a journey that is at once honest, complicated, sexy, funny and—ultimately—uplifting.

through giving up her social life in order to “care” for the dog. In “What’s the Matter with Helga and Dave?” an interracial couple with a new baby struggles to interact with their neighbors (also interracial with a child) whose reverse racism and odd parenting methods ultimately put them at war with one another. And in the eerie opening story “Admission,” tensions mount between a biracial couple when their son is admitted to an elite private Los Angeles preschool, which they applied to on a whim.

Senna—having received stellar praise for her novel *Symptomatic*—is no stranger to exploring women in stages of pre- and post-motherhood. Her analysis of the mother—tethered down by children, responsibilities, dogs and jobs—is swiftly counterbalanced by the single woman, weighed down by work, relationships and the looming prospect of having children. In the end, the question of who exactly is free applies to all of the women within these stories, making the reader pause and wonder what it is they long to be free from.

—MEGAN FISHMANN

THE SISTERS BROTHERS



By Patrick deWitt
Ecco
\$24.99, 336 pages
ISBN 9780062041265
eBook available

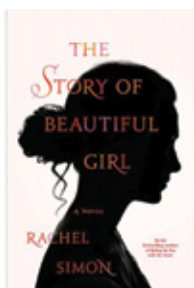
WESTERN

Readers of *The Sisters Brothers* will hardly be surprised to learn that it has been optioned for a film. After all, the fast-paced, gun-slinging Western is cinematic in scope, while its terse and comically stilted dialogue is reminiscent of recent film homages like *No Country for Old Men* and *True Grit*.

But Patrick deWitt’s follow-up to his acclaimed debut *Ablutions* is also a thrilling, smart and surprisingly touching read—the kind of book that translates to the big screen precisely because it’s so visual and visceral.

The brothers of the book’s title are Eli and Charlie Sisters, professional hit men who travel the frontier carrying out the underhanded orders of their enigmatic boss, an

THE STORY OF BEAUTIFUL GIRL



By Rachel Simon
Grand Central
\$24.99, 352 pages
ISBN 9780446574464
Audio, eBook available

FICTION

It all begins with the impossible—a white woman and an African-American man are in love in 1968. But that’s not the only obstacle in *The Story of Beautiful Girl*: Lynn timer and Homan met as patients at the abusive Pennsylvania State School for the Incurable and Feebleminded. Lynn timer has a developmental disability, which makes speech nearly impossible, and Homan is deaf, but their disabilities don’t keep them from falling deeply in love—and trying to create a family.

After escaping from the state school and giving birth to a baby

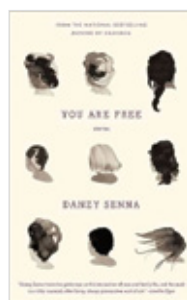
girl in widow Martha Zimmer’s barn, Lynn timer is caught by the institution’s staff and dragged back to the corrupt school, leaving the child in the widow’s care. Homan flees, and suddenly the little family’s chance for happiness seems to vanish. But Lynn timer, Homan, Martha and baby Julia—along with social worker Kate—have a permanent connection that leads them on a 40-year journey to repair what has been broken. Each chapter is told from a different character’s perspective, and we watch as the individuals find the confidence to somehow make their way back to each other.

The Story of Beautiful Girl makes a beeline for the heartstrings in capturing a seemingly impossible love story—and the secret pact that makes it so unforgettable.

Rachel Simon, who gained critical acclaim for her best-selling memoir *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, graces readers with an illuminating and affecting view into a unique and misunderstood love.

—CAT D. ACREE

YOU ARE FREE



By Danzy Senna
Riverhead
\$15, 240 pages
ISBN 9781594485077
eBook available

SHORT STORIES

Although Danzy Senna is primarily known as a novelist, literary critics should sit up and take notice of her arrival as a short story writer. With her superb collection *You Are Free*, Senna emerges with insightful stories that explore gender, race and motherhood.

A female protagonist links each of the stories in *You Are Free*; what makes them most interesting is the fact that not all of these characters are likable ones. In the powerful “The Land of Beulah,” a woman takes out her frustration from a failed relationship by abusing her new puppy, which she justifies