



Giovanna's 86 Circles and Other Stories by Paola Corso

Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Roxanne Harde

Award-winning poet Paola Corso's first collection of short fiction offers a variety of feminine perspectives from different life stages. Set in working-class Italian neighbourhoods in the Pittsburgh area, the ten stories are narrated by a variety of women and girls who offer views of the ordinary with occasional dashes of magical realism.

The volume begins and ends with narratives by middle-aged women about their mothers. In the first, "Yesterday's News," a woman mourns her mother with the help of a wildly eccentric thrift-shop owner. "Roman Arches," the final story, is just as sharply imaginative as the protagonist returns home for a Christmas visit to find that her aging mother, always obsessed with Lucille Ball, now believes she is Lucy Ricardo. Arabella blends her memories of her mother with her mother's stories of her Italian village, all interspersed with her mother acting out episodes from *I Love Lucy*. Both stories, like so many others in the book, invoke questions about mother-daughter relationships, their emotional investments and responsibilities.

While the book is being marketed to adults, the many child and teenage voices in this collection and the accessibility of the writing make it equally appealing to a young adult audience. Girls and young women are the narrators of stories that investigate a variety of female relationships: between mothers and daughters, friends, co-workers, granddaughters and their "Nonnas," and sisters. The sister stories are especially powerful.

In "Unraveled," Renata examines the paradox of her teenage sister's unwanted pregnancy and their neighbour's inability to conceive a child that her whole family wants. In "Freezer Burn," Charlene resurrects a ball of ancient starter dough for the sake of her sister. The original dough came from Sicily with their great-grandmother; Charlene's ability to make this dough rise will ensure her sister's success. In both stories, a little unpredictable domestic magic comes into play, and pain and pathos are tempered by positive outcomes.

Other stories examine sexual tensions and feminine magic: in "Between the Sheets," the heat and steam of a hospital laundry turn a teenage girl into a prophet, and female nature reclaims her own in a startling episode from the title story.

Overall, these are enjoyable narratives, compelling, often profound, sometimes poetic. Corso's strength lies in her ability to combine the mundane and the magical and make them immediate, almost tangible, to the reader. However, while her descriptive narration is first-rate,

(more)

detailed but cogent, Corso's dialogue is sometimes awkward and unnatural. While it sometimes disappoints, her poetic talent shines through in narration that combines with remarkable concision sharp observations of everyday life and philosophical questions about what that means for girls and women.

Overall, this is an excellent fiction for girls and women of all ages.