

American

BOOK

Review

Introduction: *First Fictions*



American Book Review was founded in 1977 in response to the absence of informed review attention to independent-press books in the commercial, mass-circulation review media. Unlike mainstream commercial presses, most of which have been bought up and consolidated by a handful of international entertainment conglomerates, independent literary presses base their publication decisions on a book's literary merit rather than its short-term commercial appeal. As a result, independent presses publish a disproportionate percentage of poetry books, unconventional fiction, plays, and literary translations.

Because of their inherent financial risk, first books have also become the increased responsibility of independent presses. In recent decades, this has been especially true for poetry. It's difficult to imagine the contemporary poetry scene without such major independent poetry presses as Copper Canyon and BOA Editions, not to mention the various university presses that feature poetry lines. But independent presses have also launched the publishing careers of a long list of important fiction writers, including Sherman Alexie, Paul Auster, Russell Banks, Diane Glancy, Mark Leyner, Carole Maso, Clarence Ma-

yor, and Curtis White, to name just a few. (Auster's *City of Glass* [1985] was rejected seventeen times before Douglas Messerli's nonprofit Sun and Moon Press took a chance on the unknown young writer's first fiction.)

As part of our mission to alert readers to worthwhile books that might otherwise go unnoticed because of lack of attention from the mainstream review media, we periodically focus on first books. In the last issue (*ABR* 25.1), we focused on first poetry books. In this issue, we turn our attention once again to first fictions (focuses on first fictions also appeared in our May/June 2000 and May/June 2002 issues). Not surprisingly, most of the dozen books reviewed here are independent press publications—although, as is our practice, we also give space to a few significant commercial press books. Whether or not the debut volumes reviewed in this *ABR* focus will eventually turn up on anyone's list of notable first fictions (see *ABR*'s list of Notable First American Novels in issue 21.4, available online at <http://www.litline.org/ABR>) will be determined by readers such as you. *ABR* hopes you'll begin that process by reading some of the debut books featured in this issue.