

EXPERIMENTING WITH ECO-FEMINISM

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GIRL BESIDE HIM

Cris Mazza

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Cris Mazza's *Girl beside Him* marks an important development in her career. In her ninth book of fiction, the proponent of postfeminist fiction, editor of the groundbreaking *Chick Lit* anthologies, and a leading practitioner of contemporary innovative fiction creates a compelling work of eco-fiction. She begins with the elements of genre fiction or what she might call "the ingredients of melodrama": Brian, a male wildlife biologist, tortured by family memories of violence and sex and doubtful of his own sanity, seeks solace in the study of animals. He is paired with a zoo worker divorcee who retains her capacity for romantic self-delusion even after having been brutally rejected by her husband and who comes West to start a new life working with Brian. What Mazza does with this material makes for a powerful and complex novel, rich in both originality and insight.

Part of this power comes from the author's successful efforts to evoke the landscape where the narrative takes place. Although there have been wilderness forays in Mazza's earlier fiction, perhaps most memorably the disastrous descent into the Grand Canyon by mule in the 1997 novel *Dog People*, it is fair to say that she has been a writer much more interested in the intricacies of personality and the dynamics of gender and intimacy than in the power of place. In *Girl beside Him*, Brian Leonard and Leya Karney work in rural Wyoming, near Rawlins, and the novel evokes both the

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remoteness and the power of the Great Divide Basin and the Ferris and Green Mountains around it in prose that is accurate and graceful. The Ferris Mountains as seen from the basin are "steep peaks of saw-toothed rock, like the top third of the Alps or Himalayas sliced off and set down on the Wyoming plateau, ten-thousand vertical feet of beyond-the-timberline terrain where it didn't seem to belong." In the evening, the high desert country of the basin is "[s]age, rocks, old limbs of trees brought here on a flash-flood current—everything...tinted a firelight crimson." Much of the novel's impact, however, derives from taking this interest in the landscape to another level, treating this terrain as more than simply setting. Mazza shows how the high desert country, the flora and fauna of the region, helps shape the lives both of the relocated cougars being tracked and studied and the researchers who study them.

The author also sets things in motion in ways that deepen the novel's environmental concerns. The project that drives the plot is the work of Peter Gallway who has gotten the funding and the permissions necessary to trap, tag, and sterilize a dozen lions from the country around San Diego and relocate them to the remote wildlands of the Great Divide Basin, near "the most desolate ranch country in Wyoming." The stated purpose of the study is not to protect the mountain lions (or the humans) of Southern California but to see if this kind of relocation is a better option than killing the cougars.

Brian gets this assignment after

Gallway breaks both legs and pelvis in a skiing accident in Switzerland. Brian, crippled by horrific childhood memories, puts his biology degree to work, but only on other people's projects. He gets this assignment partly because he can fly small planes and helicopters and mainly because he has no doctoral degree and thus is that rare biologist with no projects of his own. He hires Leya from a newspaper ad that reads like a cross between the Personals and the Situations Wanted section: "SWF zoological animal trainer tired of the circus, looking for real work, from safari guide to vet assistant, can anyone hear

me?" With her arrival, the inner demons that drive and threaten to destroy Brian slowly begin to take clearer shape. We know from the first of the narrative that he is "a shooter," a prize-winning marksman who keeps his rifle with him at all times and who

takes refuge in what he calls "the zone"—that deadly calm place where emotions subside and a complex world gets reduced to what he sees at the end of his rifle barrel. His hiring of Leya is a self-administered test, designed to see how he can function on his own, aside from the communal structure of previous environmental projects, and to see if he truly is—as he fears—a pathological woman-hater doomed to kill or harm the women that he is around.

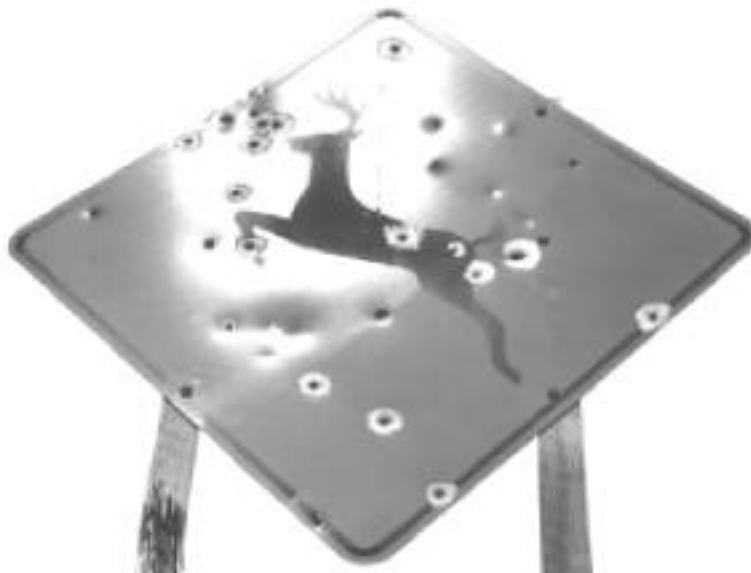
What generates much of the novel's tension and what becomes clearer as the plot progresses is the traumatic event of his childhood and a recurring obsession that he

cannot recall with total clarity: the death of his sister Diane. In their highly dysfunctional family, Diane acted as his mother; she was the one who taught him to tie his shoes and who took him to the zoo. She wanted to be a vet when she grew up and then go to work in Africa setting up a hospital compound in an animal preserve. Their favorite pastime was one they called "Daktari," where stuffed animals sat in a cardboard box compound, where he was both an injured animal in the compound and a hungry leopard prowling outside, and where she, as Daktari, came to save the compound.

In installments punctuated by his day-to-day dealings with Leya, with ranchers in Rawlings who hire him to kill coyotes for them, and with a sick cougar—poisoned by a sinister rancher who is intent on controlling Brian, on degrading and threatening women, and on

getting rid of the relocated cougars—Brian tries to deal with his past. He is haunted by his evermore nearly complete memories of his sister's death and his possible role in it and by his fears of what he might do to Leya. When these recollections come rushing back he revisits a scene where his mother's sexual abuse of his sister, his own voyeuristic and masturbatory eaves dropping on them, and his continued association of his erect penis with an about-to-be-fired gun all climax in the event of Diane's death.

These memories cast such a fearful shadow over Brian's behavior with Leya that the narrative generates a high degree of plot



tension and this, together with the lurid death scene, could belong to a different kind of novel. Mazza's style, however, takes this novel into a realm that ranges far beyond that of the gothic thriller. Her inventiveness and her narrative control convince the reader that she could write about almost anything—as she does early in this novel in a catalogue of the variety of cowboy hats in the Denver airport—and make it interesting. In this narrative focused on the portrayal of Brian's dilemma—his need to test his sanity and his fear of what he might find when he does—this stylistic richness makes for a very strong novel.

The complexities of Brian's character and the sophistication and compression of the narrative also enhance the environmental themes that are central to *Girl beside Him*. In her previous fiction, Mazza often incorporated dogs and humans into narratives so that the behavior of each species sheds light on the other. This novel continues to place human behavior in the broader context of how other species behave, and it also expands some of the eco-feminist elements that have been implicit in her earlier fiction. By interlacing Brian's childhood memories with his contemporary dealings with coyotes, cougars, and Leya, Mazza has the two narratives comment on each other. Together they provide a sophisticated consideration of the eco-feminist proposition that, in a patriarchal society, men can define and debase their masculinity through the abuse of women and nature.

This is, of course, a fairly familiar theme of contemporary environmental literature, appearing often in both fiction and nonfiction in the nearly 40 years since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. What makes this particular work of eco-fiction so worthy of our attention, however, is Mazza's refusal to adopt an easy essentialist feminist position coupled with her adept experiments in form and technique. These features combine to give the theme both a complexity and a freshness that make this novel an especially

valuable addition. This is not to say that *Girl beside Him* is a perfect novel: the over-use of Diane's death scene (even though the repetition is carefully incremental and meant to be illustrative of the depth of Brian's battle with himself) and the sudden abrupt plot resolution do detract somewhat from the book's accomplishment. However, the novel's thoughtful return, in a brief coda, to the poisoned cougar serves nicely to complicate Mazza's thematic concerns and in doing so to emphasize that this is an important addition to contemporary environmental literature.

Terrell Dixon teaches literature and the environment at the University of Houston, and he currently serves as vice president for the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. His anthology, City Wilds: Essays and Stories about Urban Nature, will be published by the University of Georgia Press in February 2002.