

Comfortably Isolated

In Midge Raymond's short stories, women seek geographic and emotional isolation

I wondered, as the character Carolina does, why would anyone bother to kill a sick old man?

He is such an iconic figure that the organizers of the coup believe he has to be done away with in order for the country to change. I think they are probably correct in thinking that his death — however and whenever it occurs — will be a moment of real change for the country.

Carlos says, "People are human beings first and spies second." Are you more interested in character than in intrigue?

Yes, much more. Like most novelists, I have a peculiar fascination with the way people behave and the psychological roots of, or reasons for, their behavior.

You've written memoirs set in Revere, Massachusetts, satires set in heaven, and thrillers set in communist countries. What are you working on now?

A novel about a very poor girl living in the woods of rural New England with exceedingly strange parents.

And then another offbeat "spiritual" novel, something in the mold of what I think of as "the God trilogy."

I have a travelogue coming out in April, *The Italian Summer*, about a wonderful summer spent near Lake Como, playing a lot of golf and eating well.

I have had editors counsel me to write

the same book over and over, and some readers who complained that I haven't kept writing books set in greater Boston.

But it would be like trying to keep a migratory bird in your backyard. I just want to go places, to see things, to observe the human predicament in different forms.

"Forget English," the Chinese tutor advises Paige in the title story of Midge Raymond's short story collection. Newly arrived in Taipei, Paige and many of the other thirty-something women at the center of these melancholy stories have chosen the isolation of living in a culture and with a language very different from their own; Paige, in fact, wants to learn only enough Chinese to read numbers, addresses, and menus. For her, says Raymond (COM'95), there is safety in being unable to communicate.

The collection, *Forgetting English*, won the 2007 Spokane Prize for Short Fiction



Midge Raymond says her characters do their best to avoid finding themselves.

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and was published recently by Eastern Washington University Press.

Raymond worked at Boston University from 1998 to 2004 as a College of Communication lecturer in writing and a writer and editor for University publications, including *Bostonia*. She spoke with the magazine about her first book.

So many of your central characters are isolated emotionally. Is isolation basic to the human condition?

I hadn't really thought about that, but part of me feels that it's why I've gravitated toward that in my writing.

One challenge for a lot of people is to get to know themselves very deeply, in a world in which you work very hard and you've got a million things going on. All these characters ended up being far away from their everyday lives.

Were these stories written for this book?

No, it just so happened that I started getting a few stories that were thematically very similar. Many characters have gone off some place because they like it that way, comfortably isolated.

Like the character who is glad she and her lover basically don't understand each other's language.

She feels a sort of safety in that, a comfort in being unable to communicate.

It's interesting that sex here often has nothing to do with romance, or with lust, but just with somebody to hold onto.

In a lot of ways it's a blind reaching out, definitely not out of love or great passion in most cases, but need and loneliness.

Is there an advantage to love not being part of it?

These characters struggle so emotionally, poor things, to avoid

finding themselves while they're being forced to do it. Sometimes, it's easier to make those connections without love or romance.

The men, for the most part, aren't very nice.

I'm not sure how that happened for me, emotionally, because I certainly have a wonderful collection of men in my life. But I think it turned out that way because I wanted to focus more on the women and their struggles.

Some of these women are pleased that there's no real long-lasting tie to the men they're involved with.

Exactly. If you don't ever get deeply involved, you can keep whatever illusions about yourself and your life that you want. I think it's only when you become truly intimate with someone else that you have to let them in and let them see who you are. These characters for the most part aren't ready or willing for that to happen.

Will they be happier when they are?

That was my idea with these stories. They're taking that step toward that, and even though we don't get to see it, we get to hope that they do end up in that place.

Are you thinking about a novel?

I actually have written a novel. It's with my agent. However, last fall, when lots of people were getting fired, it was a hard time to sell. I have an idea for another one, so I'm just going to have to get started on it.

I've had a harder time getting into novels than I've ever had getting into a story, and I think it's because when I sit down to write a story, I know where it's going and I know where the ending is. It's just a question of getting there, and I can get there within a few months, if not weeks.

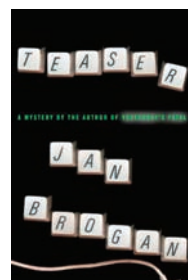
But with a novel, you just think, when will this end, when will I ever finish it? *NJM*

Fiction

TEASER

**Jan Brogan (COM'79)
St. Martin's Minotaur**

THERE'S A LOT to learn about human nature, amusing and horrifying, from browsing online chat rooms. In Rhode Island, newspaper reporter Alie Ahern finds, whatever the purported topic, two-thirds of the chat is about sex. Looking for story material to warn parents of the dangers of the Internet, she comes across two teenaged girls in a short soft-porn scene. Are they simply unaware of the dangers of such public display, or is something sinister behind it? In her third mystery, Alie soon learns that the girls are being lured into much more than fifteen-year-old suggestive high-jinks and that the most respectable of her colleagues will abandon moral principle should it threaten self-interest. *NJM*



WHAT TIME DEVOURS

**A. J. Hartley (GRS'96)
Berkley Books**

STARRING IN HIS second thriller, Thomas Knight is, like his creator, a Shakespearean scholar who finds a lot of horrified amusement in the pretentious work of his peers ("I want to learn about the play . . . what makes it profound as literature, not about



how it's a matrix for social energies and discourses . . ."). Along with many scholars, both Hartley, the Distinguished Professor of Shakespeare in the department of

theatre and dance at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, and Knight believe Shakespeare wrote a play he called *Love's Labour's Found* and that the script may be extant — wherein lies this mystery.

Also just out, Hartley's fourth