

WEB OF ANGELS

LILIAN NATTEL
Knopf Canada

REVIEW BY NIRANJANA IYER

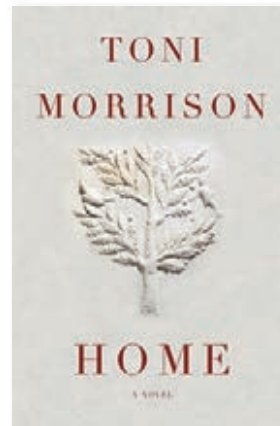
“And it all seemed so ordinary except it wasn’t,” observes a character in *Web of Angels*, and this line could well serve as the novel’s précis. The protagonist, Sharon, is a Toronto wife and mother who has successfully concealed her disassociative identity disorder (DID, better known as multiple personality disorder) from the larger world for decades. Sexually abused as a child, Sharon developed multiple personalities as a coping mechanism, and her many alters include men and infants. The alter best equipped to deal with specific situations emerges as required.

While Sharon’s husband is aware of her DID, the issue doesn’t come to the fore till a pregnant young girl in the neighbourhood commits suicide. The dead girl is sister to Sharon’s teen son’s girlfriend, Cathy, who is described as “a nice girl—her mother a doctor and her father a professor.” When Sharon learns that the pregnant girl’s baby was delivered with a kitchen knife by the doctor mother, she’s unable to bear the news, and an alter takes over.

Statistically, one in five Canadians will experience a mental illness in their lifetime, and the remaining four will have a friend, family member or colleague who will. Mental illness is often seen as juicy material for fiction, with the condition sensationalized for dramatic effect. Lilian Nattel’s plot unwinds very delicately, and Sharon’s condition is constructed as an organic response to her life situation.

The book lovingly details the everydayness of her environment—here’s Sharon’s bathroom, with yogourt tubs stacked on the side for rinsing a young daughter’s hair. Here’s a dinner group chattering about the new wine glasses—the tulip shape, the generous size. This could be your house, Sharon could be your best friend, that could be your child—look how similar they are to you, Nattel seems to be saying.

When the imperative to protect the most vulnerable cannot be denied, Sharon takes action even at the cost of revealing her condition. We learn that DID need not be defined by stigma and the need for concealment, but can translate into strength. To defeat a person with DID, a host of selves must be vanquished. If people are capable of unspeakable evil, Nattel illustrates how



they can also harbour unexpected reserves of goodness, and decency, and compassion. This raw, tender tale prods us to re-evaluate our conception of normal—whether applied to ourselves, our near ones or our society—with unsettling results.

HOME
TONI MORRISON
Knopf

REVIEW BY EVELYN C. WHITE

Nobel literature prize laureate Toni Morrison revisits familiar themes of race, gender, prejudice, betrayal and redemption in her new novel, *Home*. At 146 pages, the slender volume is easily read in one sitting and is infused with the suspense, flashbacks, mysticism, melodrama and otherworldly characters that were hallmarks of the popular 1950s-era television show *The Twilight Zone*.

Set in the 1950s, the narrative centres on Frank Money, a black Korean War veteran. Raised in Georgia, Frank has returned to the United States via Seattle. He is mentally scarred by his stint in the army and ill-equipped to flourish in a country shackled by the bigotry that Martin Luther King, Jr. would later address in his landmark 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech.

Despite his myriad frustrations—“whatever the world’s palette, his shame and its fury exploded,” Morrison writes—Frank is determined to reach his ailing younger sister Cee, who is employed by a nefarious white physician in Atlanta. “If [Cee] died because some arrogant, evil doctor sliced her up, war memories would pale beside what [Frank] would do to him,” Morrison writes. “Even if it took the rest of his life, even if he spent the balance of it in prison.”

After a hellish journey, Frank rescues Cee and delivers her to nearby Lotus, their close-knit childhood community. There, she is nursed by a devoted group of older black women whose remedy for “womb sickness” includes calamus root, quilting, singing, biscuits slathered with blackberry jam and daily doses of sunshine.

In Cee’s ascent from life-threatening illness to vibrant health, readers will find echoes of the “love your flesh” passages from Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*. Here, an elder offers Cee counsel: “Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you.... You young and a woman and there’s serious lim- itation in both, but you a person too.... Locate her and let her do some good in the world.”

As for Frank, his odyssey with Cee gives him the courage to confront the secrets that have damned him. “I have to tell the truth,” Morrison writes, yet again.

GLASS BOYS
NICOLE LUNDRIGAN
Douglas and McIntyre

REVIEW BY ANJANA BALAKRISHNAN

Nicole Lundrigan’s latest creation is a riveting tale, bursting with the potential to catapult her into the elite echelons of literature. Her fourth novel, *Glass Boys*, is set in the imaginary town of Knife’s Point, Newfoundland and Labrador, in that hazy middle ground between two feuding families, the Trenchs and the Fagans. The families attempt to live out their lives in mutual exclusion, but to no avail.

Roy Trench is dead and his brother, Lewis, believes his neighbour Eli Fagan to be the murderer. When the court sides Fagan against the deceased, it alienates the families until an evil act converges their course in the next generation. Though the all-consuming feud

darkens the narrative considerably, a bleak ray of hope manages to shine through in the form of love from shared familial lives.

Lundrigan's nimble manipulations of secrets and perceptions and the judicious trimming of the storyline are what fit the story so well into its compact framework. Furthermore, *Glass Boys* is elegantly bound together by the author's strong understanding of relationships, of their influences upon the characters and their impressions upon the reader.

Written in a narrative style where incidents are seen from the perspectives of all parties involved, Lundrigan's story develops through perceptions. There is no concrete truth—rather, everyone has their own version of it. She steers clear of water-tight good/bad classifications, breathing into her characters an endearing believability. With meals cooked and eaten even in the face of tragedy, as often happens in real life, Lundrigan keeps her date with reality.

The vividly described landscape, the ease with which she assembles the jigsaw of family dynamics and an engaging pace all mark the talent of this author. There is nothing new in the notion of a novel based on families, but it is in its compassion and contemporary treatment that Lundrigan has managed to make it joyously universal.

TEARS OF MEHNDI

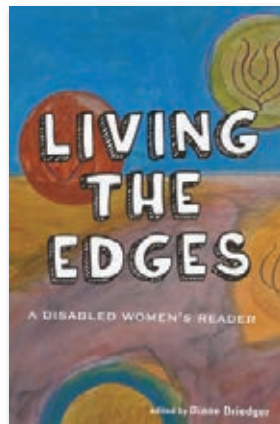
RAMINDER SIDHU

Caitlin Press

REVIEW BY NIRANJANA IYER

Raminder Sidhu's ambitious debut novel, *Tears of Mehndi*, seeks to capture the story of the Indian Sikh community in Vancouver's Little India over the past 35 years. The story begins in 1976 with a shocking racial incident—a small Sikh-owned grocery store is vandalized, with chocolate milk splashed everywhere. The graffiti reads, "Hindu brest [sic] milk for free." Now, this is a very cleverly crafted anecdote, doubly conveying the depth of ignorance faced by the Sikh community. But if there is racism without, there is oppression within.

Although the Sikh religion regards the sexes as equal, traditional gender roles dominate in a largely patriarchal community known to prize *izzat* (honour/reputation) very deeply. As ever, it is women (and their bodies) who bear the brunt of such



LIVING THE EDGES

A Disabled Women's Reader

EDITED BY DIANE DRIEDGER

Inanna Publications

REVIEW BY CONNIE JESKE CRANE

This is not an easy book to read. Throughout this "vehicle for women with disabilities to share experiences" you hit bald and uncomfortable truths—women with disabilities face disproportionate rates of violence, sexual abuse, poverty and unfair treatment at work and in medical settings.

A memorable contributor, Aboriginal writer Joy Asham,

relates nurses' "terrible rudeness" to her after she had a nasty scooter spill on an icy road in Thunder Bay, Ontario. "I never received care when I was in hospital, couldn't even get a nurse to tighten my sling. My doctor would come every day, but that was for five minutes. The rest of the time ... I was subjected to such terrible rudeness that all I could think of was going home and hiding, pain, sickness or not." Asham says one nurse told her, "Comb your hair right now!! If it isn't combed by the time I get back, I will take my scissors and cut it all off!"

This volume, which editor Diane Driedger says is the first Canadian work of its kind, reveals common themes (being outside the norm, countless challenges and barriers) and the experience of women living with a range of disabilities, including multiple sclerosis, Crohn's disease, bipolar disorder, dyslexia, blindness and hoarding. The writers also varied in their religious affiliation, economic status, age, cultural background and profession. They include women who are Christian and Muslim, gay and straight. They are graduate students, writers, actors, researchers, office workers and Aboriginal senior citizens who ride red scooters called Babe.

Thanks to some great writers (Julie Devaney and Joy Asham, to name just two), the collection brims with wisdom, candour and strength. But the best thing Driedger does is highlight our responsibility towards activism. Asham writes, "It is not just the responsibility of those who are victims to work toward positive change in a culture or work environment. Nor does it rest solely on the shoulders of the perpetrator. It is the job of peers to educate their own, to bring forth the welcoming of voices from the affected masses so that they may be heard."

fervour—there's an overriding imperative to produce male children, strictures to keep girls chaste and unworldly and, inevitably, so-called "honour killings." The issue is compounded by the hostility of the outside world. For instance, believing that Canadian education is only for those willing to integrate entirely and erase their cultural differences, some Sikh parents withdraw their daughters from high school.

There is some first-novel-itis going on, with Sidhu attempting to say everything about this community in 237 pages. And the unwieldy cast of characters (eight different first-person narrators!) meant I gave up keeping track of whose daughter was clandestinely meeting whom about halfway through the story. But Sidhu's authorial strengths are considerable, notably including her unflinching gaze and her deep insider knowledge of Indian Sikhs, as revealed in anecdotes thrumming with life and honesty.

When oppression is seemingly bound to tradition in a minority community already under siege from the outside world, dissent can seem perilously close to betrayal. In such an environment, community is everything; the universe is divided into *Apnay Lok* (our people) and the *goray* (white) outsiders.

Within the community, battle lines are drawn not just around gender but skin colour, religion, degree of Westernization and even old regional loyalties—a character remarks, for instance, that she doesn't like another woman who is from the other side of the river in Punjab, where women are said to be very cunning.

Sidhu seems to say that our definitions of community define us; we progress as humans when we adopt affiliations beyond the ones with which we were born.

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