

understanding? An elaborate ruse? What does that say about failure? Better yet, what does that say about potential?"

Such a nihilistic view may be intellectually intriguing, but it does not make for engaging storytelling. Alice and sister Edith's childhood stories are told in snippets throughout the novel, yet in the detached way we find out about them and their upbringing as the children of an entomologist and population control activist in many exotic locales, we never warm up to them. Perhaps the story seems unreal from the beginning. Sibling rivalry is another theme throughout the story, yet we never get a sense of the warmth or love that underlies the competition. The sisters' lifelong hobby of collecting "shame stories" from acquaintances provides another of the novel's threads. These are characters' memories, often of having a sexual relationship with someone

out of pity, told to Edith after being sexually teased by her to reveal them. Stories of different characters incidental to the main narrative are interspersed throughout the hijacking narrative, without clear addition to the story except to underline the disconnected, dissociated tone of the whole.

As the story unfolds and the hijacking unravels into unreality, the reader remains strangely undisturbed and aloof, because the whole thing feels hollow and unreal from the start. Certainly, we are spared the horror and terror we might have felt had we believed in the characters and the story. However, the prescription for life set out by the terrorism professor leaves much to be desired. In the end, we are reaffirmed in the knowledge that dissociation, denial, and detachment are ultimately unhealthy strategies for coping with trauma. They also make for unsatisfying reading.

appears that the house was once owned by his mother's cousin, a serial killer who died in prison years ago. It also turns out that recently several boys in the city of Millhaven disappeared without a trace. A new serial killer? Ghosts of the past? Suddenly, the tale becomes much more complicated and intertwines a murder mystery, a possible ghost-house tale, and a serial-killer tale. The last few pages tie almost everything together and explain all the mysteries. No matter how mundane and schematic it may seem, the conclusion is a bit haunting and unsettling.

There are probably several ways to read this book. Most readers will be seduced into reading it just as though it were just another horror or murder mystery. But I believe that Straub tried to write more than just an "ordinary" mystery. He skillfully examines middle-class American family relationships and the atmosphere of a Midwestern city—born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Straub seems to be quite familiar with such cities. He also examines the impact of suicide and a haunted past on a family and especially on a teenage boy. Finally, he explores various ways of coping with a loss, imagination being one of them.

The book is enjoyable, entertaining, thoughtful, and thought-provoking bedtime reading.

Lost Boy Lost Girl

by Peter Straub; New York, Random House, 2003, 304 pages, \$24.95

Richard Balon, M.D.

Lost Boy Lost Girl is the latest novel of Peter Straub, an acclaimed best-selling author of horror fiction who is also known for writing a couple of books with Stephen King via computer. Interestingly, though, it seems that Straub usually writes his books in longhand with a pen, and this book even includes an acknowledgment of the pen's manufacturer.

His latest book is a story of two men. One is a writer, Timothy Underhill, who tries to discover the fate of his missing teenage nephew, Mark. Underhill, who lives in New York, returns to his hometown—the fictional Midwestern city of Millhaven—for the funeral of his sister-in-law, who committed suicide. He

notices that his nephew is tense and preoccupied. Underhill soon realizes that Mark found his mother's body after her gruesome "triple" suicide: she overdosed, put a plastic bag over her head, and cut open both her forearms in the bathtub with a knife.

The story reads almost like a classic literary cliché so far—a stereotypical middle-class family, the husband obsessed with his status and career as vice-principal and a perspective of becoming a principal, a sensitive teenage boy who feels distant and alienated from his parents, and a hardworking wife and mother who gets "a little" depressed and cannot hold the family together anymore. Then, a few days after the funeral, the boy disappears, and his uncle is called to help find him. It turns out that for several days before his disappearance, the boy was obsessed with a mysterious neighborhood house. It

An Egg on Three Sticks

by Jackie Moyer Fischer; New York, St. Martin's Press, 2004, 320 pages, \$12.95 softcover

Katherine G. Ruiz-Mellott, M.D.

An Egg on Three Sticks, Jackie Moyer Fischer's debut novel, depicts a mother's mental illness from the viewpoint of her teenage daughter. With both humor and sadness, the author vividly portrays a 12-year-old Abby against the back-

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drop of the Vietnam War and social upheaval of 1970s California. We follow Abby's coming of age to the story's tragic yet inevitable climax three years later. The story unfolds as Abby gradually becomes aware of and struggles to understand her mother's inexorable mental illness.

From a creative and literary standpoint the book is successful in bringing to life a number of engaging and memorable characters. Convincingly portrayed are Abby; her tortured and ineffectual father; her best friend, Poppy; and her younger sister, Lisa. Abby's mother is an unpredictable mix of depressive symptoms and psychosis, which the family struggles to contain and normalize.

The story is a compelling and quick read for general audiences of any background. We are immersed in Abby's tumultuous journey through adolescence and the suburban American dream, which has somehow gone so inexplicably and fundamentally wrong. The author unflinchingly describes Abby and her family's plight and disintegration

with realism and clarity while simultaneously telling the story of an adolescent teenager struggling through rebellion and conflict to find her own identity. The family relationships, tensions, and dynamics are subtly but powerfully portrayed. We are exposed to and are left with the visceral images and awful weight of things left unsaid over countless evenings of TV dinners and network news.

The novel illustrates well the confusion, denial, stigma, guilt, and anger experienced by the family members and loved ones of those with serious mental illness. In this regard the book could be particularly recommended for significant others who are struggling with their own ability to accept and understand the mental illness of a loved one. The story's depiction of psychiatric treatment in the 1970s, with ten-month inpatient hospitalizations and the side effects of the era's psychotropic medications, makes its generalizability to current treatment of mental illness limited.

The story serves as a reminder of

how far psychiatric medication management has progressed in 30 years. Abby's painful descriptions of her mother's uncontrollable akathisia, personality changes, constant sedation, and "blank, hypnotized eyes" provide glimpses of the conflicts our patients still face in deciding between imperfect treatments and intolerable disease.

From the standpoint of its targeted teenage audience, the book falls somewhere in the no-man's-land of being too realistic and disturbing for younger readers and too mired in the first person vernacular of its 13-year-old protagonist to be engaging to readers over the age of 15. Personally, though, I found the first-person teenage neologisms—for example, "grossamundo"—entertaining and refreshing.

The book includes little information about author Jackie Moyer Fischer other than that she is a law school graduate living in Portland, Oregon. Her creative ability and talented characterizations make her an author whose future novels will be worth reading.

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