

BOOKSHELF

Fiction Chronicle: Under the Big, Sad Sky

Thomas McGuane's Montanans are less susceptible to High Plains reverie than to high anxiety.

By Sam Sacks

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Thomas McGuane has lived most of his 78 years in Montana, yet on the evidence of his fiction you get the feeling he still hasn't totally settled into the place. Interlopers are recurring characters; a sense of estrangement is ubiquitous. Sure, you'll find horses and hunting and the infrequent Big Sky reverie, but

Mr. McGuane has less in common with icons of Western machismo like Jim Harrison and Hemingway than with John Cheever, that meticulous observer of bridge-and-tunnel loneliness. "I have to apologize for replacing cowboys and Indians with generalized anxiety disorder," he once joked.

His shambling parade of middle-management bankers and developers, of eternal bachelors and henpecked husbands, are on show in "**Cloudbursts**" (Knopf, 556 pages, \$35), a meaty gathering of collected and new short stories. Mr. McGuane is best known for his slapstick druggie novels from the 1970s like "Ninety-Two in the Shade," but this collection demonstrates his rewarding second-act enthusiasm for short fiction, drawing from the books "To Skin a Cat" (1986), "Gallatin Canyon" (2006) and "Crow Fair" (2015). The comedy isn't as gonzo but the essence of McGuane-ism is very much here: dry wit, wry confusion and prose as chiseled and striking as a Rocky Mountain butte.

That essence is superbly distilled in stories like "Aliens," about a Boston lawyer who retires to Montana but finds that the state "seemed like a place he had once read about in a dentist's office." In "Gallatin Canyon," a real estate agent drives to Idaho in order to insult a businessman trying to buy his property so that the man will renege and he can accept a better offer—shenanigans perpetrated under the cold gaze of his no-nonsense girlfriend. ("I adored her when she was a noun and was alarmed when she was a verb," he says of her.) In "Old Friends,"

inertia alone explains the calamitous reunion of two middle-aged men—one a farmer, the other a banker wanted by the Feds for embezzlement: “Against these decades of loyalty, they seemed to search for an unforgivable trait in each other that would relieve them of this abhorrent, possibly lifelong burden. But now they had years of continuity to contend with, and it was harder and harder to visualize a liberating offense.”

Like all collections of this kind, repetition magnifies the author’s limitations. Mr. McGuane’s men are cut from the same sad sackcloth and his women are either humorless martinets or the type who start drinking at lunch. But even when the stories plow similar grooves, the brightness and humor of the writing never fails to delight. An awkward business dinner is described as “a less attractive form of nourishment . . . than an IV bottle.” One eccentric character is “a bubble and a half off plumb.” There are life lessons, too, for those who aspire to the aimlessness of the McGuane hero. “Do you know why your father works so hard?” a narrator recalls his mother asking. He expects a “virtue speech,” but the answer is instructive: “He works so hard because he’s crazy.”

Two terrific new story collections, Anjali Sachdeva’s **“All the Names They Used for God”** (Spiegel & Grau, 256 pages, \$26) and Vandana Singh’s **“Ambiguity Machines”** (Small Beer, 320 pages, \$16), trade the perplexities of the known world for the mysteries of imagined landscapes. Ms. Sachdeva’s book, a debut, is notable for its exuberant variety. “Glass-Lung” takes place at an Egyptian archeological dig during the age of Howard Carter ; “The World by Night” recounts a 19th-century prairie woman’s trek through the tunnels of an enormous underground cave; “Pleiades” is about the last surviving sibling of a brood of septuplets faultily engineered by their geneticist parents.

There’s an element of whimsy to this assortment, and sometimes Ms. Sachdeva is content with an easy laugh. (In “Manus,” Earth has been taken over by aliens who look like giant boogers and inexplicably speak with a Long Island accent.) The range of her gifts is best seen in the title story, about two young women who are forced to become child brides to Islamists but gradually turn the tables on their captors through the practice of mind control. The power they come to hold over the men—“a monster I hollowed out and made weak,” one thinks of her husband—is a

mark of their strength and resilience, but also proof that they too are capable of terrible cruelty. The story's delicate sadness mingles beautifully with the boldness of its conception.

The departures in "Ambiguity Machines" are even more extravagant, from "A Handful of Rice," which imagines the great Mughal emperor Akbar as a deathless shaman possessed of supernatural abilities, to "Oblivion: A Journey," an interplanetary revenge tale pitting a traumatized exile against a rogue "bio-synthetic" genocidaire.

For all the book's diversity, though, a few signal traits stand out. Like Ursula K. Le Guin, Ms. Singh is drawn to scientists, and her speculative worlds are often fleshed out through field reports and research abstracts. In "Peripeteia," a physicist elaborates a chaos theory of the universe just as the "pattern and order" of her own life are upended by the disappearance of her partner. The search for meaning and moral truth is as great a concern as the search for knowledge. "Sailing the Antarsa" encapsulates the book's ethos: It follows a solitary space traveler's voyage to a newly discovered solar system on a mission of "kinship" with whatever life forms may be there.

The capstone to this hopeful, enriching collection is the small masterpiece "Requiem," set in Alaska in a future scarred by climate change and dominated by massive tech corporations. A university student named Varsha has gone to a polar outpost to collect the effects of her aunt Rima, a brilliant scientist and engineer who died while researching whales. There Varsha witnesses a whale migration herself, and it's this miraculous encounter amid the increasingly artificial world that reaffirms the "tenuous, temporal bridge between being and being." The more mechanized our future, Ms. Singh suggests, the more precious our connections with the living will be.



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