



A trio of guts, zealotry and obsession

by
Anne Stinson

***Broken Chords* by Jocelyn Miller, iUniverse, Inc. 236 pages. \$16.95.**

Woman is born to sorrow, so the adage goes, and here's a novel that proves it. In a family that stretches the bounds of dysfunction to the limit, a tenuous reconciliation at the end hardly makes up for the disasters that precede it.

The reader has a hard time sympathizing with a hardscrabble wife overwhelmed with grief over the deaths of two of her children. She's embittered and scarred by grief. So prolonged is her mourning that she shuts off her husband and both surviving daughters, Hannah and Sissy, in the isolated farm in a mountain hollow. Dad turns to alcohol and the warm arms of a prostitute.

Both daughters have brought shame on the family by bearing children out of wedlock, in spite of their Mama's warnings about no-good mountain boys.

Thoroughly beaten down, Mama saves the money she earns making

quilts and, like Huck Finn, lights out for the territory.

Set in rural Tennessee in 1896, Miller's desperate tale perfectly conveys the hopelessness of poor nutrition, skimpy education and grueling poverty of the backwoods. Best of all, she limns the shame and condemnation directed at those who fold under pressure to be respectable in the eyes of society.

For years, there's no communication with the vanished mother. No word comes from the west, and the girls are doomed to spinsterhood with their adored babies. Life is one long drudgery with no escape in sight, just the endless toting of wood for fires, scraping enough food together to feed their father and his fatherless grandchildren.

Hannah's lover returns to the mountains after failing to find work in the city when their daughter is three, and seduces dumb Hannah all over again. She marries him, sure that she can reform his philandering ways. Wrong again, girl! He is violent, and when she divorces

him, he swears revenge.

Papa is more morose, more absent than ever, so Hannah follows him to the whorehouse, confronts his lady friend and engages in a rowdy cat fight. She and Papa are rescued by a fellow patron of the establishment who escorts them home in his buggy. He's a widower, a bank president, and is smitten by Hannah's raven-haired beauty and high spirits. He courts her for a year and she marries him. He loves her dearly and faces down all criticism of his young bride. Hannah is rich, content and supremely happy.

Meanwhile, the story of Mama's exodus: She writes years later, saying that she landed in Washington State where she cooked and laundered at a mining camp, then moved south to Spokane and opened a bakery to augment her laundry business. She skimped and saved to accumulate enough money to buy a spread as a homesteader in Wyoming.

She's fiercely independent, runs cattle and farms mostly alone, living in a tar paper shack she built by herself. The perfidy of the man she was married to is still a thorn in her side, and she threatens to shoot a hired hand for making advances.

Hannah wants to see her Mama again. She persuades her sister to accompany her on a trip west. Both are appalled at the primitive state of their mother's shack. Sissy hates

Wyoming, hates her mother and returns to Tennessee while Hannah stays on through the onset of a bitterly cold winter.

She meets the handsome widower on the next ranch over, who's been dropping in to check on Mama, making sure she has enough cow chips to stoke the stove on this treeless plain and bringing her supplies from town, as good neighbors do.

Hannah's visit is over and she's anxious to return to her beloved husband and child, so she boards the train back to Tennessee. Just before the train pulls out, she gets a telegram. Her banker husband is dead. He's been murdered. Hannah's ex is quickly captured and admits the dastardly deed. She's now a rich widow, but one happy result is that the arresting sheriff falls in love with Sissy and marries her, adopting her little boy.

Hannah's unhappy without her loving husband and is shunned by his high-falutin' friends so she returns to Wyoming to be with Mama. When Mama falls ill and Hannah rushes to her handsome neighbor for help in a blizzard, she lands in a ditch and is rescued by the widower. Need we say more? The music swells, mama dies and Hannah lives happily ever after.

It's about time. The angst has been as thick as blinding snow all her life.

Miller's prose is exactly right in this chronicle of adolescent blind

hormones, drudgery and bereavement without a touch of smarm. The dialog rings as true as if it were dictated. The bad luck that follows innocent victims is completely believable and we cheer on the rays of brightness and endurance by the characters.

Jocelyn Miller is in real life Jody Panzenhagen who lives in Cambridge. She's the Co-Regional Coordinator of the Eastern Shore Writers Association. Her work has been published in *History Magazine* and *Heritage of the Tow River Valley*. This is her first novel, inspired by her maternal grandmother who abandoned her family in mid-life to homestead alone on the Wyoming prairie.

***Dinner Diaries* by Betsy Block. Algonquin paperbacks. 261 pages. \$14.95.**

The subtitle of this mildly annoying book is *Raising Whole Wheat Kids in the White Bread World*. The author comes across as a nagging, authoritative pain in the neck who must be right all the time and before whom her kids cower, complain and behave like tantrum-prone brats.

No wonder. She's a zealot on a mission. Her children, ages 9 and 5, snack all day on junk foods, hate vegetables and contribute to chaos at the dinner table. Her husband is equally persnickity with a long list of what he absolutely will not even taste. Add to that toxic mix

a mother who has variously been a vegetarian and a vegan and you have one family's version of a perpetual food fight.

The 5-year-old limits her food intake to almost all carbs. She wants spaghetti and bread for every dinner. Between meals, she begs for junk food. The older child eats meat almost exclusively.

It's rewarding (and exhausting) to read her diary of how she bent them to her will and 10 months later they're all healthier. She's lost weight and never has felt so well and taught herself to be an expert on nutrition. In the meantime, she's made herself such a general nuisance in the school cafeteria that she's been banned from it. She's also made herself a pest with proselytizing to her friends, but this is a control freak with no brakes.

It's all for a good cause, of course, and now her kids prefer raw veggies as snacks, have quit whining at dinner and have enlisted in the plan.

It all began with her pediatricians's advice that her 9-year-old boy was overweight and a candidate for diabetes if she didn't change his diet. That's a valid wake-up call for any mother, but few of us would take it to such draconian measures.

In her self-education, Mrs. Block is horrified to learn so much more than she suspected about growth hormones and antibiotics in meat and poultry, chemical residues

from fertilizers and pesticides, etc. in commercially grown vegetables and fruits, additives in milk and subtractions in white flour. Preservatives and loads of sugar in children's cereals and baked goods turn her blood cold. Fish is also suspect, so her choices are limited in seafood.

She's on a mission, and if you're similarly horrified, this is the book for you. Frankly, I'd rather take my chances.

***Off the Deep End* by W. Hodding Carter. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 209 pages. \$21.95.**

Here's the story of a man obsessed by two goals. One of them is qualifying for the 2008 Olympic Swim team at the age of 45. The title says it all. He's really off the deep end in more ways than one. If I were his wife, I'd have followed him to the YMCA pool, jumped in and held him under.

With a name and heritage like Carter, it's understandable that he also wants to make a mark as a writer comparable to that of his illustrious father and grandfather. The latter had been a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist in the middle of the last century and the author of 17 non-fiction books. His father also won numerous awards for his writing in the Wall Street journal. Both of them tried to discourage him from following in their footsteps.

He worked at a career as a freelance writer, a fool's errand for most writers. When his plan to try for an Olympic spot took hold, he became a swim coach to give him more pool time.

Whatever possessed him to reach for the stars? More than 20 years earlier at Kenyon College he had been an NCAA Division III All-American and a national champion on his college swim team.

Now, over the stretch of several years he trained with four coaches, innumerable talented swimmers with the same goal, and returned to Kenyon to train with his former coach. He pushed himself to go to the Caribbean and swim short distances from one island to the next against four-mile and hour currents in spite of his horror of sharks. He entered a relay race in frigid water in New York harbor and nearly drowned before he was pulled out. He entered every race that would give him points in his quest for the Olympic tryouts, all the while trying to shave tenths of a second off his times. He swam in pools for three to four hours every day, six days a week.

Page after page describes his training routines and unless you're a avid swimmer with Olympic goals, you may find your self yawning.

Luckily for him, his patient wife, herself a practicing lawyer (and breadwinner) and his four children indulged him in his plan. A afore-

mentioned, I'd have drowned him fairly early in the game.

The book was finished in December, 2007, before the Olympic team was chosen. If you're a competitive swimmer, you may want to check in August to find out if he's among the team members. Who knows? He may come home with a gold medal. I don't think he's in the running for a Pulitzer for this book.