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QUEEN OF THE SUGARHOUSE

Constance Studer

Atmosphere Press (168 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

Studer, the author of *Body Language: First of All Do No Harm* (2009), explores life in medical institutions from varied perspectives in nine stories.

The collection opens with "Mercy," about an intensive care nurse who administers the wrong drug to a patient; the narrative digs beneath the everyday turmoil of life on the ward to examine the vulnerability of medical staff and how they deal with the trauma of their work in their personal lives. The following story, "Shelter," introduces Benjamin Tyler, a destitute Desert Storm veteran who's being treated for a debilitating illness following his tour of duty, and "The Isolation Room" is about a writer who's committed to a mental institution after cutting her wrist. "Special Needs" follows Maria, a waitress whose brother, who has muscular dystrophy, is institutionalized; when she becomes pregnant, she wonders if she carries the gene that caused her sibling's disease. The title story closes the collection with a poignant tale of a daughter nursing her mother through chemotherapy following a mastectomy. In these stories, Studer, a retired nurse, offers a dazzling and nuanced portrait of the medical world. She's unafraid to depict the horrific but also acutely sensitive to the complexity of the psychology at play in this challenging environment. Her affecting prose allows readers to experience hospital life through the perspectives of patients as well as medical staff. On occasion, the characters' observations can be wistfully poetic, as in "Mercy": "I've seen the signs of imminent death: a blurring of the body's boundaries, a gentle and sometimes not-so-gentle fusion with surrounding elements, a sigh into oblivion." In other instances, the author offers up brutally vivid tableaux, as in "Shift": "The boy's heart floats in a pool of blood like a drowned kitten. The doctor's hands continue to work inside the chest." Studer successfully captures a spectrum of emotion in these tales, including her characters' matter-of-fact approach to death: "It's raining outside. The toddler is very dead."

A brilliant, if harrowing, set of tales featuring sharp prose.

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