

Reviews

Beauties. By Mary Troy. (Kansas City, MO: BkMk Press, 2010. Pp. 368. \$16.95, paper)

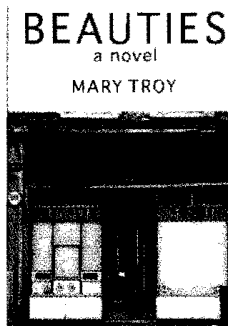
Mary Troy's spiraling novel *Beauties* is at once both intensely local, grounded in the mean urban streets of St. Louis, and firmly philosophical, eliciting questions about love, beauty, family, and meaning at midlife. *Beauties* tells its tale in two alternating narratives, oscillating between the voice of Shelly, a beautiful but twice-divorced woman in her mid-thirties, and Bev, her disabled cousin. The story primarily revolves around their quest to run the newly opened Alibi Café in a downtrodden section of St. Louis that "seemed to whisper loser with the hiss of each passing bus" (p. 11). Yet the women seize upon it as a place of promise, finding ample space for self-reinvention in the neighborhood's cracked facades, pawn shops, and boarded-up buildings. The café's kitchen becomes the heart and soul of the book, brought to life in wonderfully sensuous descriptions of the various culinary delights it produces. It serves as both a domestic space, where familial tensions and intimacies play out, and a world of entrepreneurial promise and purpose.

Troy, a member of the English department at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the head of its MFA program, wrote *Beauties* to expand on an earlier short story, "The Alibi Café." And expand she does: we get glimpses of both senior citizen beauty pageants and the moneyed, drama-filled world of private high school, and we peer into the world of the legal system

through various subplots that serve to make this novel more than a mere domestic drama. While for some readers the myriad subplots that Troy deploys may be challenging to follow, more often than not the novel's subplots serve to accurately reflect the messy, complicated nature of adulthood: the way it is filled with conflicting desires, triumphs intertwined with failures, and inevitable losses. The novel's multifaceted structure also serves to mirror the complexity of contemporary urban life, and Troy introduces us to a range of realistic neighborhood characters, pinpointing both the class tensions and the unusual alliances that make urban life an exhausting but enjoyable challenge.

This foundational tension between public and private plays out well in the text, which balances its investment in exposition and plot with the women's introspective reflections regarding far-reaching questions. Shelly ponders the way her beauty has both propelled her through life and stalled her progress, leaving her childless and looking for love; Bev reckons with her intense desire to adopt a neglected boy who frequently stops by the café, and struggles to overcome her reluctance to open herself to intimacy. Both cousins contemplate the formative role that being part of the "Stillwell beauties" has played in their lives, and Troy sophisticatedly unpacks the nuanced set of tensions that underlie midlife: the search for meaningful work, the need to feel desirable despite aging, the struggle to forgive, and the intricacy of adult love.

Of special concern in this novel is its theme of beauty, which Troy complexly renders as a set of meditations on the relationship between mind and body, disability, vanity, and aging. Bev's disabilities, which are the result of "Mother's Help," a drug designed to prevent nausea during pregnancy, are never "reduced to sentimental sludge" (p. 280). Instead, we are



given a sensitive--not sentimental--delineation of disability and its relationship to beauty, strength, and sexuality. Beauty transcends the merely physical: it becomes a concept synonymous with grace, yet it also remains a deliberately vague concept throughout the novel, both valued and troubled, less attained than sought after and sometimes rejected. As such, Troy reveals that beauty--here hardly a static, normative aesthetic--is found less in the mirror and more in the kitchen, the bedroom, and in acts of self-reflection and love.

Despite the set of serious concerns that crop up in the text--disability, divorce, teenage pregnancy, urban crime, neglect--Troy has produced a novel that is admirably buoyant, filled with a lively sense of wit that leavens the cousins' struggles, bequeathing a sense of solidarity, and gracefully enriching the nuanced glimpses of their lively community. Like the newspaper review the Alibi Café receives within the novel, *Beauties* is "Schizophrenic but Good": eclectic without being irritatingly quirky, emotional without being overly sentimental (p. 221).

--Lisa Hinrichsen

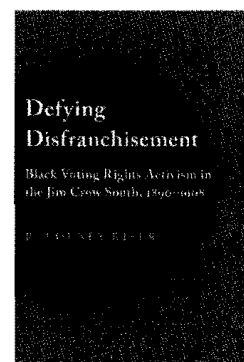


***Defying Disfranchisement: Black Voting Rights Activism in the Jim Crow South, 1890-1908.* By R. Volney Riser. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. Pp. 326, acknowledgments, a note on sources, notes, index. \$40.00, hardcover)**

Ask U.S. history students which Supreme Court decision affirmed the constitutionality of racial segregation laws and most will cite *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Pose a similar question about the Supreme Court's role in approving Jim Crow-era voting restrictions, and even historians may

hesitate to answer. *Defying Disfranchisement: Black Voting Rights Activism in the Jim Crow South, 1890-1908* addresses this gap in historical knowledge through a complicated narrative of early African American voting rights litigation; complicated because on the issue of black disfranchisement, the federal courts repeatedly evaded constitutional questions. *Plessy*, though disappointing, was decisive. More than a dozen voting rights cases provided no such clarity. The Court rejected many challenges on technical points and strangled the rest with circular logic.

Take, for example, *Mills v. Green* (1895), the first African American disfranchisement challenge to make it to the Supreme Court. Attorneys for Lawrence Mills, a young African American tailor living in Columbia, South Carolina, requested an injunction to halt voter registration for an upcoming election because the state's new voting restrictions violated the Fourteenth Amendment. The Circuit Court denied the injunction stating that the effects of the new registration law were hypothetical since the election had not yet occurred. Yet when the *Mills* case reached the Supreme Court, it was turned down because the election had already occurred, rendering the case moot. This double-bind was not the only problem for voting rights activists. *Mills* also ran afoul of the Political Questions Doctrine. This judicial principle, dating back to the early 19th century, held that



political issues (as opposed to legal ones) should be settled by the "political" branches of government. It was a maddening obstacle for voting rights activists; the provisions they sought to challenge eliminated black influence in the very state legislatures

where "political" issues over poll taxes, onerous residency requirements, and the grandfather clause were to be resolved.