Honk if you like driven writing

By JOHN MARK EBERHART
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KIRKWOOD, Mo. - Mary Troy loves misfits.

"I have a lot of characters in my stories that I wouldn't want to spend much time with. And I wouldn't want to live next door to them. And I would really be upset if they wanted to marry my niece. But I like them anyway because I understand them."

What she understands is that they, like many of us, have problems of their own making - and that this does not necessarily make them bad people.

"Not one of us has ever said, 'I'm going to quit school and get this job because I really want to screw up my life,' or 'I'm going to marry this person because I want to be miserable.' We always think we're doing something that's going to be good for us.

"What I want my characters to do is cause their own problems. I really can't stand writing about victims. They screw up their own lives, but they manage to sidestep the really big disasters. Maybe that's my version of being alive."

She has presented that bleak but funny version of life in three books of short stories: Joe Baker Is Dead, Cookie Lily and The Alibi Cafe, which was published by UMKC's BkMk Press. Some of the Cookie Lily stories are set in Hawaii, but most of her tales take place in Missouri, often around St. Louis.

Wherever they occur, Troy's stories always seem to involve folks who could be doing better. "We're Still Keeneys" presents a family of losers: "Dad's still an on-again-off-again drunk, nearly as regular as the even and odd-numbered years, and Mom still has a deep-down itch, strong as it ever was, to have as many men as one lone woman can handle."

The Keeneys live in a Missouri burg that is seeing modern changes but still has a chip on its shoulder: "All the high school kids dress in baggy clothes now, but they still

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look like someone just ‘shot their dog and they expected it, so they are not too bummed out.”

And “We’re Still Keeneys” is one of Troy’s more conventional stories. “Mercy the Midget” features a short woman who regularly leaves her eastern Missouri farm clan to dance in a St. Louis strip club.

When Mercy confronts a group of religious zealots, she defiantly tells them, “I prayed for these breasts. I been blessed.”

Troy was born in Florissant, a St. Louis suburb, in 1948. She got her bachelor’s in English at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, then worked as a technical writer in the College of Engineering at the University of Hawaii.

She didn’t start writing fiction until her 30s. As a staffer at the university, she could take classes and as “a lark” took a creative writing course. Her first story got published, then her second. She was accepted in the writing program at the University of Arkansas and confesses she was too naïve to realize her good fortune at joining such a prestigious program on her first try.

Though she has lived far from Missouri, Missouri never has been far from her writing. “The Midwestern voice is like a tamer version of the Southern Gothic. My students ask me why I make up these quirky characters, why someone always does something odd in my stories. But I don’t think they’re odd. You’re not trying to create something odd; this is how people can be.”

Troy’s humor saves her stories from being oppressive. Yes, her characters bemoan, but Troy’s prose also brings out the comedy in their lives. When one of the Keeneys says, “Even we don’t like to be around ourselves,” many honest readers probably can’t suppress their grins (or grimaces) at their own family’s bad apples.

Yet, Troy says, “some reviewers have said all my stories are so sad.” One reviewer in particular has found more melancholy than absurdity in her work. “My next book,” she jokes, “I’m going to make so sad he has to take Prozac to finish it.”

She doesn’t know yet what that book will be. She has completed a novel that is in the hands of a literary agent, has started another and has written more short stories. But her time for writing has been curtailed by the annual academic cycle. Troy heads UMSL’s MFA program in writing. So she writes two days a week — and takes comfort in the knowledge that a good idea can strike anytime.

“I get my best ideas when I’m driving.” She can’t remember to keep a notebook in the car, “so I end up writing ideas on the backs of gasoline receipts or my checkbook stub or something.”

“And I’m the person who sits at the red light. If the light turns green, and you’re saying Why won’t she go?’ it’s because I’m not there anymore. It’s like the rapture has happened, only with me it’s a story, so you have to honk.”