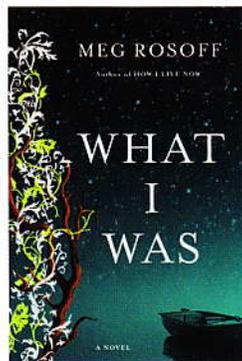


Book Reviews



WHAT I WAS
BY MEG ROSSOFF
(VIKING, 224 PAGES, \$23.95)

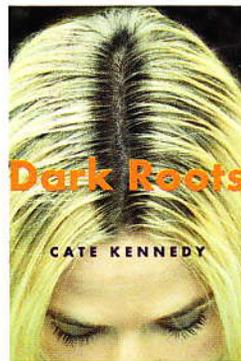
What I Was doesn't read very differently from young-adult author Meg Rosoff's teen novels. Although her writing style is decidedly less choppy, it's still blunt, graphic, and direct. Shying away from her former trademark stream-of-consciousness approach, the attempt at catering to an older audience in this novel is apparent. The book follows a 16-year-old wallflower, identified only as H, who attends a stuffy British all-boy boarding school. He encounters Finn, a mystifying young man living alone in a seaside hut.

As far as society is concerned, Finn doesn't exist. His name isn't in any government records, he lives in geographical seclusion, and he doesn't have relationships with anyone in the outside world. He fishes for his food, makes his own fires, and bathes in the ocean. We get it: The contrast of Finn's primal instincts to H's sheltered English civility is supposed to be stunning. Predictably, the two form a bond that incites H's taste for adventure.

Unfortunately, Rosoff doesn't quite develop her characters enough to make the story engrossing. She reiterates H's adolescent self-loathing relentlessly, and her attempts to make H charmingly accessible in his failings only makes him seem boring and klutzy. She should also stick to female protagonists: Her depiction of the male mentality feels borderline stereotypical when she details testosterone-fueled altercations and secret porn collections. She also puts too much effort in painting a superficially gothic world for her prep schoolboys — compulsively describing scenes with the word "Edwardian" — but the stylistic details simply don't suit her factual, direct writing style.

When Meg Rosoff debuted with the taboo-busting and politically charged *How I Live Now* in 2004, critics couldn't stop raving. Her momentum was building when she followed up with Salinger-esque *Just In Case*. Now, she's trying adult literature, and she might need a little more practice.

— Michele Koury



DARK ROOTS: STORIES
BY CATE KENNEDY
(BLACK CAT, 224 PAGES, \$13)

Cate Kennedy's debut story collection is about two things: death and dying. In the first story, a young woman's girlfriend is in a coma following an auto accident and the woman must decide whether to take her lover off a respirator. In the second, an aging athlete puts the 15-year-old family dog down, almost as an afterthought. The third story takes place entirely in an airport, where a woman dying of some unnamed disease is trying to calmly smuggle three kilos of cocaine back into the country for one last drug-tinged hoorah. And in the fourth — well, you get the idea.

The 17 slim stories in Kennedy's collection, which was originally published in Australia in 2006, are brimming with an incidental sort of misery. Step off the sidewalk wrong and bam!, the whole landscape of your life is changed. Taken individually, a handful of the stories are richly haunting, peppered with evocative imagery (a Chinese line cook tosses the wok "so that everything inside rolls over like a wave on a smoking black beach.").

But as a whole, the collection does little but strike the same chord over and over again. There is the shark attack, the unprompted seizure, a boyfriend's murder following his request that his girlfriend have an abortion. Some stories miss their mark entirely: this one too pat in its embrace-your-aging-body sentiments, that one incapable of bringing the character to life.

Layered atop one another, even Kennedy's more graceful stories don't deepen the aching sadness or vulnerability of her characters. Instead, the collection steamrolls the individual nuance into a monotonous but serviceable beat. Life is dangerous, connections are tenuous. But in the end, Kennedy isn't able to push the reader past these observations and deliver impact.

— Kate Rockwood



VIBRATOR
BY MARI AKASAKA
(SOFT SKULL PRESS, 160 PAGES,
\$13.95)

Taking over the wheel of her lover's long-haul truck on a trip back to Tokyo, the heroine of Mari Akasaka's third novel notes, "I felt only the vibrations." The same could be said for the novel itself, having an elegantly raw resonance. *Vibrator*, first published in Japan and having nothing to do with sex toys, is about a road-trip love affair

between Rei Hayakawa, a bulimic middle-class journalist, and Okabe Takatoshi, an ex-Yakuza thug-turned-truck driver.

Rei notices Okabe at a Tokyo convenience store while she is buying wine and decides to pick up Okabe instead. They drive across a snowy landscape as Rei records Okabe's stories of growing up in gangs and they carnally explore

each other over the hum of the truck. First published in Japan, *Vibrator* was made into a critically acclaimed film in 2003.

As we see Rei rejecting the conformity of middle-class Japan, what's unusual are the similarities that could be drawn between her reactions to living in a compartmentalized society and ours. The loneliness in Rei's choice of alternative lifestyle is completely translatable. *Vibrator* is about finding connections anywhere we can.

The point of disconnect is not the emotional translation — it's the language. At times, we wonder if there's more to the story that might be buried beneath the translation, with its frustrating word choices. The voice can be too formal and stilted for Rei's (possible) mental instability, some of the sex scenes are clunky, and the similes flop (such as "Being here is like being in this man's womb.") As much as we'd like to be there with Rei, the reader can't help wondering what Akasaka was really saying unfiltered by a language barrier.

— Jen Girdish