

BOOK REVIEWS



LAST SEEN LEAVING
By Kelly Braffet
(Houghton Mifflin, 272
pages, \$23)

Even readers who relished Kelly Braffet's deliciously gothic debut, *Josie and Jack*, will have a hard time pushing through her second novel, *Last Seen Leaving*. It's an inoffensive but non-compelling read in which the main ques-

tion of suspense is whether the story will transcend the usual formalities of a mystery-thriller and plumb the complexities of the characters.

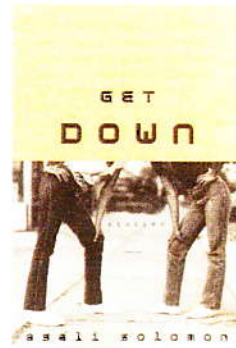
Josie and Jack depicted the suffocating intimate relationship between a pair of isolated siblings in a decrepit mansion overflowing with dusty curios. If Braffet's first novel is a story about too-close connections, *Last Seen Leaving* is a novel about absence, disappearances, and emotional voids created by being left behind.

The story begins when Miranda disappears after her car is totaled in an accident, and she hitches a ride with a stranger to an anonymous Virginia town, having chosen to leave her previous life behind on a whim. But the man who drove Miranda from her car crash to her new life keeps reappearing unexpectedly. And as the plot thickens, it becomes troublingly apparent that he may be more sinister than initially thought.

As her mother, Anne, flounders in her search for Miranda, and the narrative switches between the two women. The pages turn more quickly when the narrative is on Miranda, an ex-Dungeons-and-Dragons-playing badass who dabbles in dangerous behavior, rather than on her tentative mother, who's interested in New Age mysticism and mainly plays a waiting game. In many ways, Miranda's disappearance echoes the disappearance of her father, Nick, who mysteriously vanished decades ago while flying a top-secret mission in Central America. Both women feel Nick's absence as the chasm that separates them from their previous happiness.

Where Braffet struggles is in overemphasizing Nick's absence as the convenient defining malaise for both mother and daughter, who gradually disconnect from each other and from themselves. The flashbacks, which show the only times both women interact, are another way to rehash the overarching significance of Nick's disappearance rather than revealing further character insight. When Anne learns of her husband's death only moments before her 8-year-old daughter brings her a nearly dead kitten whose mother has been killed along the side of the road, we can't help but feel manipulated (and not quite successfully at that).

Absent from this novel are the very skills that Braffet has plied so well elsewhere: subtle symbolism, deft imagery, and the ability to portray an intoxicating intimacy within a vivid, nuanced world. *Last Seen Leaving* is an otherwise fair read made uniquely more disappointing given the high hopes with which we approach this talented author's sophomore effort. — Kate Rockwood



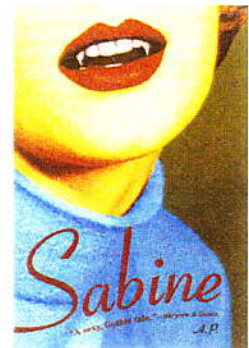
GET DOWN
By Asali Solomon
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 208 pages, \$21)

The seven stories in this collection, all set in urban and suburban parts of Philadelphia during the Reagan era, adroitly explore the social and racial dynamics of black young adults on the verge of definition. They're at a crossroads in their lives and on a major detour from familial values, community expectations, and cultural ideologies. The characters stray in many ways: through inappropriate sexual longings, racial jealousy, and class envy.

In "Twelve Takes Thea," 12-year-old Thea navigates the rocky social politics of junior high as one of only two black girls at her mostly white prep school. Torn between her fear of and desire for assimilating into upper-middle-class white culture, Thea rejects and ultimately betrays her only other black classmate, Frances, a smart girl who embarrasses her for being so "ghetto." "This is you," the girl tells Thea, holding up an Oreo as a visual aid.

"William is Telling a Story" is another piece that posits the title character against an uncomfortable situation. William Stuart sleeps with a white woman as a way to feel closer to his male lover Kelly, who "had fucked several white girls before college, and he said you could get them to do anything." In one poignant moment after this conquest, William "has a quick, sad fantasy of comparing notes with Kelly."

With surprising and outrageous observations, Asali Solomon examines how we make choices about our identity against the larger social consciousness of family and community. *Get Down* is a collection of superbly nuanced psychological portraits about what it means to be black, what it means to be an individual, and what happens when those two categories are mutually exclusive. — Kelly White



SABINE
By A.P.
(Black Cat, 224 pages, \$12)

If you were looking forward to the lesbian-vampire pulp exercise this novel seems to be, you'd do better heading back to the dingiest corner of the bookstore and picking out something else. With a teaser like "Forbidden schoolgirl love in '50s France," I thought I couldn't miss, but this offering from an anonymous author is pretty bloodless fare.

The story is told in retrospect by Viola, who in 1958 was a 17-year-old British deb packed off to a questionable finishing school in the French countryside. Viola and her compatriots pass the days smoking, lazing about, acting existentially, and attending social events at the *châteaux*. The schoolmistress is Aimee, a genteel, aging pervert who sets her charges in spicy situations, then bursts in with feigned shock before the moment of consummation. Enter Sabine, a chain-smoking feminist brought in to replace the French instructor. Cross Simone de Beauvoir with James Dean and you're close enough. Viola falls for her, and we get a brief, sexless idyll before the novel chugs on to what all the heavy foreshadowing portends.

After hitting it off with an aristocratic young man at yet another party, Sabine takes to her bed with a mysterious, lingering illness, and some sloppy hickies, and jealous Viola contracts a bad case of the sleuths. Spoiler time: those seedy *châteaux* parties are thrown by noble, decrepit families of (gasp!) vampires vetting their young offspring for membership, and Viola is next. The real mystery is why a brood of dusty bloodsuckers apparently ready to die of boredom would bother inducting their equally dull, pampered scions into the club. Maybe the whole thing's a social critique of European nobility, or an antidote to the Anne Rice school of fluffy-shirted vampire sex fiction. Ultimately, I would have liked a little less *noir* and a little more life. — Donna Blumenfeld