

Staying Out Late

BRUCE SPANG

VIRGINIA'S APPLE: Collected Memoirs

by Judith Barrington

Oregon State University Press. 234 pages, \$24.95

MEMOIRS take a slice of history and reveal what it was like not only growing up in a certain time and place, but also what changed inside a person as they came to terms with being who they are. For someone raised in the 1950s, when conformity to certain norms was strictly enforced, being a lesbian was dangerous both personally and professionally. A minor slip-up could cause someone to lose their job or their family.

Judith Barrington's collected memoirs, *Virginia's Apple*, offers a window into how the homophobia of those times injured everyone in its path. Rather than produce a linear account of her life, she ladles out small doses in a series of episodes: her affair with an exotic aunt who introduced her to sex; being in the closet at work; the perils of traditional marriage; early love affairs; emigrating to the U.S. with her new lover.

When I began reading her book, I wasn't sure if I could relate to the anxieties and joys of a budding lesbian, but Barrington's frank and engaging style immediately caught my interest. In scene after scene, her humor and delight invite you into the moment. Even her ill-fated marriage ceremony comes to life: "As I walked toward the door holding Colin's arm, the organ was so loud I feared it might blast the old church into pieces. I imagined the fragments flying up into the sky and twirling around before falling in slow motion onto the roofs of houses."

After meeting the woman who would become her life partner, she ruminates about what, after all the years of denial and hiding, still troubled her: "Sometimes it seemed as if falling in love had pushed me right over some crazy edge. Back in the days of Nicolette, and even of Lillian, I'd had no vision of a life with a woman, even while I flailed around desperately trying to create one. In those days, I could say that I wanted to stay with my lover forever, but I could no more picture it than I'd been about to picture married life with Colin."

What's so refreshing in her memoirs is her ability to hold the doubt, even the incomprehension, that lingered inside her, as it did for many of us in those years, since being committed to a same-sex partner was so beyond the pale that it was hard to accept. She's able to recreate the dreadful moments of going to an inn and asking for a room—a simple act to which most people wouldn't give a second thought. Yet for her, when asked by the proprietor if she wanted a "single" or "double beds," admitting she wanted a single meant she was exposing her lesbian relationship and having to face the clerk's disdain.

In her later years, she has wonderful stories about getting to know Adrienne Rich, a fellow poet who had a quirky, indomitable personality. An expatriate living in Oregon, she returns later in life to England to find the remains of childhood memories in old homesteads and apartments, some bittersweet,

some just bitter. She also speaks about aging and how she and her partner, after creating an institute for women writers, have settled into a life together where both can explore and expand their connections to the world.

Although these memoirs were written over six decades, they read as a seamless recollection of an age and speak to the dread, the joy, and the angst of coming out at a time when doing so could be life-threatening. In our own troubling times, her reflections become all the more germane, reminding us of the courage it once took for people to discover the truth about themselves, and to let the world know about it.

Bruce Spang is a poet and writer living in Chandler, NC.

Identity Theft

MONICA CARTER

THE SAFEKEEP: A Novel

by Yael van der Wouden

Avid Reader Press (Simon & Schuster). 272 pages, \$28.99

RECENTLY SHORTLISTED for the 2024 Booker Prize, *The Safekeep* may seem at first to be a historical novel about a complicated lesbian relationship. But this debut novel soon evolves into a fraught tale about interpersonal attraction and layers of generational pain based upon deceit. Possession of a childhood home and the persistence of memories drive the novel forward and permeate the characters' relationships.

Set in 1961 in Amsterdam, the novel centers on Isabel, a lonely, cold woman in her twenties whose only communication is with her brothers Louis and Hendrick. She lives by herself in the house she grew up in and obsesses over its contents by fastidiously keeping inventory: the silverware, the candlesticks, and her mother's precious china decorated with hares. Their father died long ago, and, although Louis owns the house, he allows Isabel to reside there, sheltered in her small world. She views the house as her connection to her recently deceased mother, and she guards it fiercely. One night, Louis invites Hendrick and Isabel to a restaurant for dinner to introduce them to his new girlfriend, Eva. Isabel is judgmental and antagonistic toward Eva, who responds with warm politeness. Shortly thereafter, due to an out-of-town work assignment, Louis tells Isabel that Eva will be staying with her for a month.

Thus begins a complicated, sensual game that increases in psychological intensity as the novel unfolds. Items go missing one by one even as their sexual tension pushes Eva and Isabel's boundaries of self-identity. Each gives in to the other's seduction, but suspicion, manipulation, and jealousy continue to haunt their interactions. They tread cautiously around each other, aware of Louis' eventual return.

The theme of possession—of physical objects, of another person, of one's sense of self—runs strongly through the novel. Isabel believes everything in the house belongs to her, including Eva. For her part, Eva is preoccupied with possessing specific objects—a spoon, a candlestick, a menorah—that she