Contact Us | Place an ad | Home Delivery | Site Map | Print Edition | Services

Become a mySun member | Login







HOME MARYLAND NATION/WORLD BUSINESS SPORTS ARTS/LIFE OPINION

Search:

MARKETPLACE JOBS CARS REAL ESTATE SHOPPING

Site
 Web





arts/life > books & mags

REVIEW: NOVEL

Tale of food and relationships feels half-baked

BY LIZZIE SKURNICK SPECIAL TO THE SUN

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED JUNE 11, 2006

>>> The Whole World Over Julia Glass

Pantheon / 528 pages / \$25.95

One might think that a novel spanning the art of cookery and Sept. 11 (or, as the Library of Congress has it, "1. Women cooks-Fiction. 2. September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001-Fiction.") might take its title with a decent pinch of salt as well. But Julia Glass' The Whole World Over, the follow-up to the National Book Award-winning Three Junes, means to live up to its title, double connotation and all. It's a tall order, and, like the "tent-sized" cake that Greenie, the novel's cook in question, bakes for her boss' nuptials, the book is multilayered, dense - and slathered with an ill-advised layer of frosting.

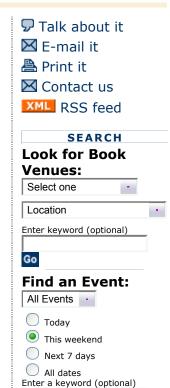


Bad Credit Refinance Complete our form for up to 4 free quotes. 60 seconds could save you \$

www.nextag.com

Baltimore Mortgages From American Home Mortgage, offering lower mortgage payments. www.mortgageselect.com

Like Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City, The Whole World Over works within the modern urban canvas, where characters are connected by far fewer than six degrees. In Three Junes, Fenno McLeod, a Scottish expat cast down in Greenwich Village, is the unwitting satellite around which a motley crew - an acerbic critic slowly dying of AIDS, a single mother, McLeod's own scattered family - revolves. Fenno is back in The Whole World Over, his Bank Street bookstore now an unofficial town square where a new assemblage intersects and, ultimately, connects.



Go

Power search

1 of 3 6/11/2006 3:17 PM First up are Greenie and restaurant owner Walter, who bond respectively as foodies and orphans - all their parents were killed in car crashes. Greenie's psychotherapist husband, Alan, subtly needles her profession, while Walter carries on a fruitless affair with Gordie, a very rich - and very married - lawyer. Yet another car crash has stripped a young woman, Saga, of both her memory and a marriage, and she's moved on to a semi-life of rescuing abandoned animals. Car crashes aside, it's not a stretch to feel that Glass' characters are wrecked too, and now cast, through choice and circumstance, outside the thrum and hum of normal life.

However, while Maupin's Tales of the City is a glittering web, shimmering here and there with delicate strands of connection, Glass' is closer to a city wrenched of its fourth wall, the reader able to peer into apartments lit like dioramas. Sure, paths cross, but the haphazard lurching spirals away from a sensible destination. Greenie's character stuck? Send her to Texas to work for a chicken-fried statesman from Santa Fe, N.M. Alan's life insufficiently complicated? Get him a son he never knew he had. Not much happening with Walter? How about he takes in his slovenly teenage nephew? Saga's got a secret from the past? Spoiler alert - she was pregnant when her car wrapped around that tree. This is not plot, alas; it's the absurd gasp of a soap opera clocking in at its 10th season.

Glass' characters often seem clumsily depicted as well. A German accent is rendered with attendant "vills" and "vasses"; Fenno's black assistant, Oneeka, prefaces her few sentences with "Girl"; the black chauffeur has a penchant for "man"; Walter's laid-back nephew, Scott, prefers "dude." Each single woman in her thirties is dying for either a child or a husband (to be fair, so is a gay character, Stephen); Walter is witty and fab-five ready - filed under "Here and Queer!" in the Greenwich Village phone book. Greenie and Alan's son, 4-year-old George, is prone to charming mispronunciations like "scale" for "stale," the kind of thing endearing only to a parent (or an author). Glass can and does turn a fabulous phrase - describing butter as that "Protean substance as wondrous and essential to a pastry chef as fire had been to early man" is genius - but she does not lavish the same on her characters.

The first plane that slams into the World Trade Center is an inarguably radical deus ex machina for this inchoate spread, and, as the conclusion of The Whole World Over shakes out, ultimately tasteless. While the national tragedy fractures the rest of the country, it functions as a kind of "two minutes in the closet" game for the novel's characters, bringing Fenno to Walter, Greenie back to Alan, and Saga into a life of independence. Undoubtedly, Glass means to suggest how our bonds are both tenuous and enduring, but couldn't a blackout have given Fenno a chance to tell Walter he thought he was hot? Ultimately, this whole world is, simply, overdone.

Lizzie Skurnick, a Baltimore writer, is the editor of Old Hag, a literary blog at www.theoldhag.com.

Copyright © 2006, The Baltimore Sun | Get Sun home delivery

¬ Talk about it

E-mail it

Print it

Contact us

Cont

Top books & mags headlines

2 of 3 6/11/2006 3:17 PM

- Murdering to dissect, indeed
- Tale of food and relationships feels half-baked
- This account of capitalism on the move is worth the ride
- Cranky idealist changed his fortunes by turning his readers' stomachs
- A transnational sojourn from death to life

Top baltimoresun.com headlines

- Pupils' futures show disparity in city
- Stakes high for action on energy
- Local publisher missing from boat in bay (1:35 PM)
- Alberto becomes first named storm of 2006 (11:21 AM)
- Thousands take in HonFest

Most e-mailed in the past 24 hours

- 1. Hey, Bawlmer, get in on it
- 2. Pupils' futures show disparity in city
- 3. Stakes high for action on energy
- 4. Local publisher missing from sailboat in bay
- 5. Costliest power in deregulated areas
- More most e-mailed

baltimoresun.com > books & mags

back to top

Today | Live! | A&E Today | Modern Life | Travel | Art/Museums | Books/Mags | Movies | Music/Nightlife | Restaurants/Food |
Theater/Dance | TV/Media | Bay/Beach | On Campus | Visitors' Guide
Home | Maryland | Nation/World | Business | Sports | Arts/Life | Opinion
Marketplace | Jobs | Cars | Real Estate | Shopping

Contact us: Submit feedback, send a letter to the editor, submit a news tip, get subscription info, or place an ad.

baltimoresun.com (TM) and sunspot.net (R) are copyright © 2006 by The Baltimore Sun. Terms of Service | Privacy Policy

Maryland Weather

Classified partners: Jobs | Autos | Homes | Apartments

Become a mySun member | Login

Search: Go Site Web enhanced Google

3 of 3 6/11/2006 3:17 PM