Suzanne Heagy

The Art of Being Good

Lisa Birnbaum, *Worthy*. Ann Arbor: Dzanc Books, 2016.

The title character of *Worthy*, Lisa Birnbaum's debut novel, lives an itinerant life that finds her finally in a strip club in Tampa where she tells her story to an anonymous listener. English is her second language, and she speaks lyrically in a voice inflected by her Eastern European roots. Worthy, also known as Ludmilla, left her home as a young woman to travel with Theodore, an older man and the love of her life, a brilliant intellectual who attracts her with the "small folding theater" he carries around.

Theodore's philosophy, as old as Shakespeare, is that all the world's a stage. Together, the two of them make up the world as they travel from Europe to New York to Mexico to the French Riviera, guided by "Four Books": Melville's *The Confidence Man*, Nabokov's *Despair*, Camus's *The Fall*, and Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull*, *Confidence Man*. As a young woman, and eventually Theodore's wife, Worthy listens and learns from her scholarly lover, often enjoying the playfulness of donning roles and making up stories, especially when it's improvised for pure fun, to entertain or amuse strangers.

Worthy goes so far as to see the folding theater as a way to find "really a meaning for the self, maybe morality." Theodore's theater offers other people a "way to open the heart" and to "help to release what they hold," to expose their most naïve or generous impulses in order to inspire self-awareness or validation. Worthy asks, "If we become confidence artists, are we not artists? Could we make a good art, art of good?"

Her theatrical skills are tested by one of the central cons of the novel. Daniel, a wealthy young man from Mexico City, must marry in order to come into his inheritance. Worthy and Theodore decide to help him. Ludmilla, who is Worthy, performs the new identity of Katerina, his fiancée, and Theodore becomes her terminally ill uncle. While the two are certain to profit from the deception, Worthy still wants to have "a good purpose, serving a right, and best result not just for us." Daniel will, after all, gain his birthright and the freedom that comes with it.

After the marriage is accomplished and all have parted ways, Worthy and Theodore "talk about if we did some good to set free our friend." Daniel's family is described pejoratively as "power," and as "a pretty prison of greed and prejudice." The con seems morally relative,

balanced between harm and benefit. Other cons in Birnbaum's novel may not even be cons, like the couple's relationship with Mrs. Finch, an elderly woman who lives next door to them in New York. She has no relatives, and the couple begin to care for her, until they leave to travel to Mexico, leaving her behind to sicken and die. Mrs. Finch bequeaths the couple all her assets. Worthy responds, "Well, maybe we can say it is love, those bank accounts Mrs. Finch dedicate to us."

Worthy confesses to the anonymous listener some remorse that she wasn't beside Mrs. Finch in her final days. She also worries about the women who dance in the strip club in Tampa, one with a sick child and another whose boyfriend is physically abusive. Worthy's character embodies compassion, deception, and reflection, making her desire to live a moral life available for scrutiny by the reader.

While Theodore's fate in the novel is surprising, it isn't unexpected. A man who carries a folding theater in his pocket can't live without being the director. Birnbaum pushes that notion to its logical conclusion, leaving Worthy on her own in the world. How she makes her way from the loss of the great love of her life to a strip club in Tampa twenty years later is its own journey of moments, both tragic and pleasurable. Quite often, Worthy's story breaks my heart a little bit. Her life is as different as anyone's can be, and as rich and worthy of reading.

Rachel Romeo Puccio

The Misfortune of the Unlived Life

Stephanie Dickinson, *The Emily Fables*. ELJ Editions, 2016.

Stephanie Dickinson's book of short stories, *The Emily Fables*, carries the reader through a sensory journey. Dickinson carefully selects each compelling word, thrusting us into the landscape entirely. We feel, hear, visualize, smell and taste the sensations of the Iowa farm. We feel the soil between our toes, hear the birds and the sounds of nature, visualize the changing seasons, and taste the freshly plucked food. Dickinson's alluring language creates a strong connection between the reader and the stories' protagonist, Emily. This relationship grants us the permission to tune in to Emily's feelings as she struggles with accepting her life on the farm. As she is constrained by the rules of her society, the reader identifies with her. Throughout the stories, the major conflict between modern and traditional roles surfaces, and the misfortune of the unlived life becomes achingly real.

Dickinson's powerful language clashes with the darkness that constantly looms over the stories, creating a bewitching war on our emotions. Dickinson drives the recurring motif of female suppression and an unlived life with the dark and dreary setting and repellent descriptive words. From the beginning of the collection, we realize that Emily is different. She was a "black-haired baby" and had "thick black hair" like her father. Emily relates more to the black sheep on the farm than with her own mother: "I would always love the ewes, as if they alone knew the truth of me." Dickinson uses Emily's idolization of her father and hunger for adventure to illuminate her desire for non-traditional roles: "My father, my idol, I saw forever adding to the cellar's bounty, planter and reaper of the fields, builder of milk houses, the sweating cold rocks of its walls, keeper of the cows."

Emily and her brother have a deep connection to nature and a great appreciation for all that it offers. They do not back down from the wilderness or the creatures that it shelters.

> My brother and I had a mother and father out there on the other side of the trees; sometimes we wondered about them, and sometimes we forgot, and believed we were the spawn of timber wolves or bobcats. Starlings with their black feathers and golden eyes. Never were we deer mewling. Never prey melting away with their shy, mournful eyes.

The siblings in the woods symbolize Emily's desire for freedom, and the wilderness offers that to her. Dickinson wittily uses the scene of Emily climbing the rock wall with her brother to unmask the battle between experience and innocence within the feminine and masculine binaries. The reader agonizes with Emily as she suffers her ultimate defeat, being marked with scarlet fever immediately after.

Dickinson evaluates society's expectations of women and the emotional effects they carry. Emily loathes her entrapment in the kitchen: "I still don't have the knack of wringing a chicken's neck, plucking, butchering, frying, and setting it on the table between the bowls of dumplings and sauerkraut . . . . When we pray to give thanks we should pray to the hen for her blessing." Emily's suffering extends far beyond the kitchen as she struggles with becoming a woman and accepting the loss of her innocence:

> I see myself from a distance, one of me doubles over in the field, another me lies by the creek, one bare foot in the water. The creek-girl rolls over onto her side, admires the daddy-long-legs arching up on feelers as if they were ballerinas. . . the field me hides itself between corn rows, takes off its glove, hoists up the dress, then wrings out the sodden rag. The thing resembles the liver of a freshly slaughtered calf. My hands, the butchers.

Dickinson shuts down any idea of romanticism with Emily's distaste for marriage and a life of work on the farm. She is not in love with her husband nor does she seem to be attracted to him sexually: "Tonight when he enters my body, so do the chores: the animals to be fed, the burning cook stove." Instead Emily hungers for knowledge while "her mother thinks learning for a girl is foolish." Emily yearns for books, "the smooth skin of its cover, how forbidden, how different from the wooden spoon, the knife, the scrub board, the rag, the hoe, the harness, the blue grist stone. The scent of its pages." She would have preferred a life of education and experience. The farm could not nurture her creative mind and desire to be intellectually stimulated. "Always the back-break fields, then in bed, no rest. An eighteen-year-old girl with unruly hair shouldn't look like she yearns to make love when its verbs to conjugate in a dead language she craves." Emily's paradoxical relationship with her mother and repulsion to her marriage once again brings to light the conflict between modern and traditional roles.

The female protagonist also distrusts her religion as the constant gloom of death looms over the farm due to a lack of modern medicine and treatment for sickness and disease. The descriptive

language in these scenes paints a haunting image for the reader: "The angel his hands on her throat and she struggles to wrest them off—not hands, not feathers or fingers, but talons, a steady tightening. There is no way to breathe. The angel is carrying her to her frozen waste." In these mournful scenes, the reader is not only able to visualize the power of death painted by Dickinson's words, but also be suffocated by the danger.

The hero's tragic fate throughout the stories is that she cannot escape the constraints of her society and culture on the farm. She suffers a life of unending sacrifice and, thanks to Dickinson's captivating poetic language, the hero's struggles become achingly real. Fear and hopelessness entrap Emily, and she becomes paralyzed by her lack of passion. Dickinson does not waste a single word, and the reader is unable to shake the misery.