

TELLING HER STORY

a review

by Sharon E. Colley

Heather Frese. *The Baddest Girl on the Planet*. Blair Publishing, 2021.

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HEATHER FRESE, a resident of Raleigh, NC, has published fiction, essays, and poetry in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere, earning notable mention in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology* and *Best American Essays*. She earned her MFA from West Virginia University.

Heather Frese's debut novel, *The Baddest Girl on the Planet*, is the 2021 winner of the Lee Smith Novel Prize. The novel tells the story of spirited Hatteras Island, NC, native Evie Austin and her struggles as a young mother and divorcee trying to make sense of her life. A strong-willed young woman telling her own story is familiar to readers of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Southern women writers, such as Kaye Gibbons, Connie Mae Fowler, Jill McCorkle, and, of course, Lee Smith, whom the award honors. Smith's female characters need courage to thrive in their challenging and at times impoverished environments. Frese's book updates and offers an original contribution to this popular vein in Southern women's fiction.

While most of the thirteen chapters (note unluckiness reference) use first person, three chapters, including the final, are in second person. With many young writers, this choice can come off as experimenting for its own sake, but Frese's effective usage helps readers empathize with the protagonist. Furthermore, the orally-inflected novel skillfully alludes to multiple text forms. In Chapter Five, Evie tries to cope with the death of her aunt, "the one constant presence in my life" (67). She playfully organizes the narrative around rules from her imaginary *Big Book of Funeral Etiquette*: "Even if the deceased did indeed enjoy both fishing and the company

of fishermen, waders are never appropriate funeral attire" (70). Chapter Seven, "Postpartum, 2009," is punctuated by letters to Dear Abby, while Chapter Ten, "An Open Letter to Patricia Balance, 2008," is written as a class assignment during Evie's only semester in college. The oral quality of the narrative slips seamlessly into these mini-textual forms, creating a varied and lively book.

The novel's title, *The Baddest Girl on the Planet*, is an ironic reference to former heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson, at times called the Baddest Man on the Planet. Evie begins the book by stating, "My husband is not the first man to disappoint me. That honor goes to Mike Tyson" (1). This combination of the spoken voice, sarcastic whimsy, and complicated feelings about men thread through much of Evie's narrative.

The popular culture image of Mike Tyson is a touchstone for Evie. As a child, she met Tyson in passing during a vacation and proudly exaggerated their friendship at school, until he was accused of rape. Then her social stock plummeted. Frese adeptly returns adult Evie to the symbol of Tyson at several significant moments, to surprisingly gratifying effect.

Evie is entertaining from the start, but not appealing initially. While she does not deserve the novel's title, in the first chapter she seems mean-spirited and weary as she rationalizes an affair near the end of her short marriage. Much of this energy

reflects the way she sees herself and her circumstances at this difficult moment.

By the end of the novel, we discover that Evie has believed too much local gossip about herself. After acquiring a not completely deserved reputation in high school, followed by an unplanned pregnancy and a tumultuous early marriage, Evie embraced a negative view of herself. Eventually, the reader and Evie learn that she is kind-hearted, somewhat responsible, and not nearly as wild as advertised. The novel's development allows the reader to see Evie's growth in self-esteem and self-respect. In the penultimate chapter, Evie wanders around Las Vegas, hoping to find and "to get revenge on [Tyson] for ruining my life" (204). Tyson represents for Evie the men and things she has trusted only to feel betrayed. The rather tipsy but humorous pilgrimage enables Evie to finish processing negatives in her past and possibly move towards embracing a positive future.

Evie's relationships with men, however, do not provide the only thematic material. Her friendship with Charlotte, who vacationed on Hatteras Island as a child, surfaces at important moments in Evie's life. Charlotte's family is wealthier

than Evie's, and their lives significantly diverge when a pregnant Evie leaves college to marry while Charlotte continues through graduate school. Their



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perspectives clash in Chapter Four, "Dominican Al's Once-in-a-Lifetime Honeymoon Extravaganza, Sponsored by Dominican Al's Rum and Fine Spirits, 2014." Post-divorce, Evie has entered and won a free honeymoon in the Caribbean; she takes Charlotte as her "partner." When Charlotte bemoans the resort's exploitation of poverty-stricken islanders, Evie explodes: "You mean the way you colonized my island every summer? How come that never made you uncomfortable? How come

you think you have the right to exploit the locals there but not here?" (58).

Evie is smart and perceptive; though Charlotte often provides her a rational, calming influence, Evie pushes Charlotte out of her comfort zones, intellectually and emotionally. The friendship is as significant as and longer lasting than Evie's romantic relationships. Similarly, motherhood is a central theme in the book. As she narrates her experiences with her newborn, Evie is unsentimental and honest about her physical and emotional exhaustion. Her unromanticized description of life with a sometimes confusing, sometimes exasperating, but dearly loved child is convincing and moving. Her difficulties trying to sort out what is best for

each of them, and how much motherhood requires of her, serve as an ongoing conflict in the book.

The Baddest Girl on the Planet is an engaging, clear-eyed, and emotionally nuanced story of a young woman's twenties. The text's oral narrative voice, its use of humor and unexpected mixtures that work, as well as its exploration of perennial themes of relationships, friendship, and motherhood, provide a fresh voice engaging with familiar Southern themes. ■