

WHO'S NOT AFRAID AFTER FLANNERY O'CONNOR?

a review by Dale Neal

Beth Gilstrap. *Deadheading & Other Stories*. Red Hen Press, 2021.

Ashleigh Bryant Phillips. *Sleepovers: Stories*. Hub City Press, 2020.

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BETH GILSTRAP is a writer, professor, and editor in Louisville, KY. She graduated from UNC Charlotte with a BA in English Language and Literature and an MA in English. She is also a graduate of the MFA program at Chatham University. Her work has been published in literary magazines such as *Denver Quarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *Minnesota Review*, *Wigleaf*, and *Gulf Stream*.

ASHLEIGH BRYANT PHILLIPS is from Woodland, NC. She has an MFA from UNC Wilmington and is teaching at Appalachian State University and in the low residency MFA program at West Virginia Wesleyan College. Her work has been published in *Paris Review*, *Our State*, *Lit Hub*, and *Oxford American*, among others.

Writing about the South should come with its own trigger warnings. Flannery O'Connor learned that readers outside the region too often confused realism and the grotesque in her short stories. O'Connor still reigns as the shock queen of Southern Gothic, ruthlessly ready to massacre a whole family so a grandmother could get her cosmic come-uppance in O'Connor's most anthologized tale, "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Ashleigh Bryant Phillips proves unafraid to bring her own "maimed souls alive" as O'Connor put it. Phillips can still shock us with the New South she depicts in her impressive debut collection, *Sleepovers*, winner of the C. Michael Curtis Short Story Book Prize. Lauren Groff, who judged the annual contest, rightly called Phillips's stories "incantatory."

Phillips drops us smack dab in the swampy, piney, humid region of North Carolina's rural Halifax County with local landmarks like the Arrowhead trailer

park, J.J.'s grocery, and a slew of dollar stores. "You've really got to love this place to stay," says one resident (186). In unflinching prose, Phillips doesn't so much portray this place's neglected children, troubled teens, suicidal men, and sad women, as channel their inner screams.

These are people haunted by ghosts and regrets. They sometimes sing out loud the bloody hymns of their fundamentalist churches, but Jesus doesn't seem intent on saving them from their circumstances, which include drug addiction, masturbation, pornography, sex trafficking, bestiality, child abuse, and domestic abuse.

In the story "Unspoken," Hal and Clara Parker contend with a young drug addict living next door with an unruly dog that gets into the Parkers' hydrangeas. Whereas Hal is losing his patience with the low-life neighbor, his wife keeps trying to give the poor kid leftover meatloaf in Tupperware. Hal is ready to murder the neighbor or at least call the law when he catches the

addict having sex with the dog. The situation gets even worse, but Phillips ducks the sensational, filling in the backstory of the long-married couple, who had lost a young child born with a defect. This story of shock and sorrow winds up in a sacred place, the Parkers' local congregation. "In her whole life of being in the church, Clara had never asked for an unspoken. It was a rare request, reserved for those who were brave enough to ask for prayers about the unspeakable" (51).

Phillips is a brave enough storyteller to give us stories about what too often is unspeakable. Most of these stories are told in first person point of view, typically from young girls or newly adult women, but Phillips isn't confined by gender. In "The Bass," Donnie Dunlow wrestles with his suicidal thoughts and being a good man to his young wife and child, but he's tempted by the flirtatious Krystal, a clerk at the Duck Through convenience store. He goes fishing at the pond where his wife had to rescue him from a suicide attempt. Phillips offers no easy resolution, but a convincing portrait of a man drowning in his own sorrows.

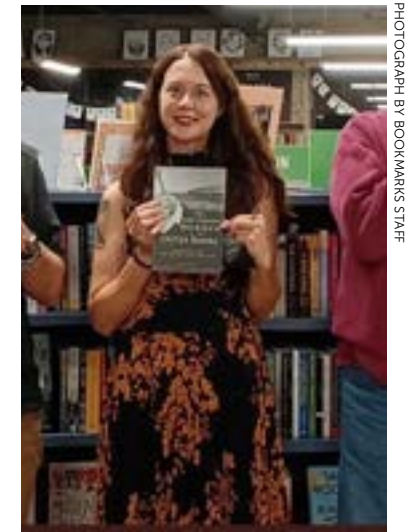
In "The Chopping Block," the first-person narrator had a taste of a better life and a higher education, even reading Sylvia Plath during a short stint at the Halifax Community College. She's been dumped by a bad boyfriend she met on OKCupid and in Google Hangout. But she has a serious drug addiction and years of neglect with an infection in

the back of her mouth. And she is too ashamed to see a dentist even if her worthless brother-in-law pays for it: "as soon as I opened my mouth, the dentist would say 'You're a dumbass,' and I'd say, 'No, I'm just poor.' And I didn't want to have to say that" (188).

Phillips reminds the reader that the only unforgiveable sin in American culture is the poverty that tells people that they are worthless. She doesn't ask us to pity or judge her characters. What truly shocks the reader is Phillips's compassion for these troubled souls.

Southern myth loves to portray women as sassy belles in crinolines. In the hard-edged yet lyrical stories of **Beth Gilstrap**, women bear the brunt of the realities of our twenty-first-century South: dead-end jobs, bad boyfriends, drug addictions, domestic abuse, broken marriages, and broken hearts. In *Deadheading & Other Stories*, winner of Red Hen Press's Women's Prose Award, the Charlotte native gives us the lay of the land in evocative microfictions and smartly plotted longer stories, often with recurring characters.

In "No Matter How Fine," and "Sale Day," we follow Janine, who's juggling an abusive girlfriend with a potential new partner. Her mother abandoned her years ago, her father is drinking too much; and Janine is trying to keep her head above water with a second-hand furniture boutique in a Charlotte of gen-trified and blighted neighbor-



PHOTOGRAPH BY BOOKMARKS STAFF

hoods. Janine still mourns her common-sense grandmother who died on Independence Boulevard "T-boned turning left" at the Exxon. "If her grandma was still alive, she would get her advice on buying. Woman had the best taste in the family. 'Fabric is like people,' Grandma Sue would say. 'Some of it strong, some of it weak, but always true to its character'" (58).

And so Gilstrap's characters are true to themselves. In "Ain't Nothing but Fire," we see Janine's father, Hardy, years later, sober and decamped for Myrtle Beach. His estranged wife, Loretta, tracks him down. Here and in other stories, Gilstrap is very good with her ear for the banter between long-time couples, even after bad marriages. Loretta is looking for a second chance, but may have waited too long with a cancer diagnosis she reveals to her ex. The story could end mawkishly, but Gilstrap lands masterfully with a flash-forward into the future.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MISSY MALOUFF

ABOVE Ashleigh Bryant Phillips reading at the Pink Moon bar in Asheville, NC, 2021

ABOVE Beth Gilstrap after a reading at Bookmarks, a bookstore in Winston-Salem, NC, October 2021

The book's strongest pieces come at the end with two connected stories about a woman named Layla after the Eric Clapton rock anthem. In "Still Soft, Still Whole," she meets what seems like the man of her dreams, in Home Depot of all places, in a witty, flirting argument over when's the best time to plant hyacinth. Layla and Beau's courtship is too quick, at only two months, before they're married.

Violence always lurks in the background of these stories, likely to blow up like a summer thunderstorm. A black snake eats some baby chicks in Layla's renovated back garden. In a shocking scene, Beau cuts the snake's head and shakes out the dead birds from the reptile's belly.

The threat is more explicit in the title story, "Deadheading." Layla has lost her house when a trio of baseball-bat wielding brothers come to collect the debts from her deadbeat husband, who's abandoned her. Layla moves to a dilapidated farm near Asheville. She's still haunted by the abuse of her marriage, with snakes crawling through her dreams. But she had a chance to redeem herself from victimhood when she steps in to intervene in the child abuse she sees her neighbor Adelaide inflicting on her young daughters.

In a shocking twist of violence worthy of O'Connor's Southern Gothic classics, Layla proves herself. "She had done so much nothing before now" (229). And Gilstrap proves her mettle as a storyteller of our changing South. ■