"THE HUMAN **HEART IN** CONFLICT WITH ITSELF"

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a review by Patti Frye Meredith

Erica Plouffe Lazure. Proof of Me & Other Stories. New American Press, 2022.

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Proof of Me by Erica Plouffe Lazure, winner of the New American Fiction Prize 2022. proves itself with dead-on details and a pitch-perfect voice. These loosely linked stories make you gasp or laugh or both, but this collection goes further. Lazure's people break your heart. Not in any kind of cuddly way. Lazure takes no sentimental short-cuts. Her people hurt, and you feel their hurt because you're no innocent bystander. Lazure pulls you in.

I read the first story, then googled Lazure and found the introduction she wrote for her story "Heirloom" in the July 2021 edition of The Dead Mule School for Southern Literature. "I am not a native Southerner. but I can tell you that the eight years I lived in eastern North Carolina gave me what I needed to become one."

She absolutely became one. How else to explain Uncle Andy's Charger painted up for a demolition derby, or Kitty Ingram Lanford's difficulty lining up convertibles for the Fourth of July parade. (Surely, I don't have to tell you what for).

But this writer is a shapeshifter. She doesn't only nail being Southern. She nails being human with all the angst that entails.

The home base of this collection is down east. Mewborn, NC, a partly fictional town on the Neuse River, but her people migrate. To Nashville, San Francisco, Boston. No matter where they go, Lazure captures the vibe. Her world is the real one and her people are flesh and blood.

One of my favorite stories, "The Ghost Rider" features Quinn, a side-player in a Nashville cover band. His girlfriend, Sage, may or may not be pregnant. Here they are at his gig at a Broad Street Bar:

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I could feel her smolder as I walked my fingers up and down the neck of my Telecaster, taking my cues from Billy Dice. The melody is predictable enough on these old standards that your fingers do all the work, leaving time for your brain, when it wasn't contemplating the likely arrival of a swaddle-clothed tot drooling on the fringe of your favorite Western shirt and the angry musician it would one day call Mama, to take in the crowd a flirty band of Brazilian dudes; road trippers fresh off a blues night on Beale Street, assessing the two cities and their sounds as though they were in charge of them; a few regulars and a handful of tourists who actually eat those godawful fried baloney sandwiches; the overeager divorcée first dates, overdressed and sitting way up front like teenagers, hell-bent on having a good time; the line-dancing retirees clumsily keeping rhythm with their twists and turns. Say what you will about this gig - and Sage had a lot to say about it, that I was wasting my time on these old hat standards and this two-bit band – it makes people happy. We're not fifty steps from the Ryman but if you can throw basically the same party almost every night and folks still show regular as the tide, you're doing something right. (19)

Hearing Quinn defend his "twobit band" makes me sympathize with this guy who can't get out of his own way. He's kind of a mess, but you feel for him. That's how these stories play with your affection.



or the past twenty years had convinced Fred Murphy that he was never alone. Every summer, Murphy would lie in a field or boat somewhere with his microphone and headset, collecting data, listening for signs of life and love. He was never disappointed. Some nights he caught the whirring screech of the male cicada. At other times, on the shores of the Pamlico River, he'd hone in on the peculiar boops of the sea trout or the red drum. And in the background, if he listened carefully, he could hear much more than that: the murmured march of ants underground or the frazzled buzz of the mosquito. Sometimes the rush of wind would chafe the surface of the calm estuary, and he would take in that, too. Listening to the chatter through the headset made the world seem full and rich, amplified and isolated, all at once. On occasion, out in a field at dusk, someo ne would find him. Usually, it was a lone man and his unleashed dog. Other times, a few jar-clutching children on the hunt for fireflies. He was never surprised. Footfalls have a way of interrupting the natural flow and swish of wind, especially in a field, and the microphone could cue him in better than any bloodhound. Something is always there to keep you company, Murphy believed, should you care to listen.

He tried to explain all of this one day to Martina Finch, the Biology Department secretary at Eastern Murphy had never paid her much attention, although he wasn't blind to her charms. Every time he entered the department office for a package or an appoin her head would turn at a perfect ninety-degree angle, her smile ready, determined to accommodate. When she typed, which was often, her spine straightened and her breasts would somehow angle up, trapped by wooly sweaters, which she wore even in the Her left hand winked bright with jewels; he had heard

she was getting married.

When the last of the students cleared out for the summer. Murphy would stop by the office nearly everday to see if his kitchen bees had arrived. He had never really set out to become a keeper of bees, and how he came to have a hive happened as a kind of a mistake to begin with. After a while, he found that he rather liked the hymenoptera order; he liked their busyness and sense of purpose, even after the swarming debacle back in April. One afternoon, Murphy heard a rhythmic click and buzz in the hallway. It grew louder and stopped in front of the door to his office. There he found Martina Finch in the hall holding a box from the Beeline Apiary in Medina, Ohio.

"Well, aren't you nice, lugging those bees up two flights of stairs for me?" Murphy said. "You must have known how bad I wanted 'em."

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In "Shad Daze," we're back in Mewborn at the Shad Festival. which Lazure describes right down to the t-shirt booth. Noah has brought his Philadelphia girlfriend, Wendy, home to meet his family. What he tells Wendy about his sister, Sissy, had me expecting the worst, and Sissy delivers. But then, just when I was totally comfortable with my assumption, Lazure flipped it and made me not only give Sissy a second chance, I saw her heartbreak. That same flip occurred at the end of "The Shit Branch" when we see what Wylie's father carries in his pocket.

In "Spawning Season," Ted Murphy, a biology professor at Mewborn College, goes out to the Neuse River to record the mating language of fish. Who knew fish talked? Lazure. It's my belief she's heard them because she has evidently heard everything else. Or as the story says, "Something is always there to keep you company, Murphy believed, should you care to listen" (32). Lazure cares to listen.

These stories are linked in a way that makes you have to think about it. Sometimes you wonder, what's the point? But the little bit of backstory and

history make each person more complete.

If I've made you think this book should only be read while listening to YoYo Ma playing something serene on the cello, think again. People catch on fire, freeze in snowdrifts, burn the fingerprints off their fingers, get stabbed multiple times by pencils. Physical pain comes into play and leaves not only superficial wounds.

But, back to the heartbreak. I appreciate Lazure's incredible talent, but I'm in awe of her respect for human nature. Here's what a spurned wife says in the story "Annealed": "Wholeness exists in the creation and the ruination. And I have never failed to create my own ruin" (114).

Erica Plouffe Lazure could write about anything. She could capture any time, place, person. That she chose to write about people in North Carolina is a gift and a reminder that it's empathy and compassion that matter. Clear-eyed, unbiased, honest appraisal that sees beyond stereotypes beats insider adoration anytime. While other reviewers have compared her to Flannery O'Conner, I'm going to go with William Faulkner, who said, "The only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself."*

On the difficulty scale of writing, I put the short story right up there with poetry. North Carolina is blessed with masters of the form, Jill McCorkle, Ron Rash. Elizabeth Spencer. How lucky are we that Lazure chose us, North Carolina, for her Southern home.