

“THE HUMAN HEART IN CONFLICT WITH ITSELF”

a review by
Patti Frye Meredith

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

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ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE is the author of two flash fiction chapbooks *Sugar Mountain* (Ad Hoc Press, 2020) and *Heard Around Town* (Arcadia, 2015), and a fiction chapbook, *Dry Dock* (Red Bird, 2014). She is a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars and holds an MA in creative writing from East Carolina University and a BA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She has taught English at ECU, Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, NH, and at School Year Abroad in Viterbo, Italy.

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:

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 “two-bit 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.



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. ■