



“LOVE JUST THE WAY IT IS”

a review by Sally F. Lawrence

Elizabeth Spencer. *Starting Over: Stories*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014.

SALLY F. LAWRENCE taught for many years in the ECU English Department and now lives in Maine. She has served as an assistant editor of *NCLR* and reviewed several books for past issues, as well as written essays about the bookstores in Ocracoke (in *NCLR* 2005) and the Early Girl Eatery in Asheville (in *NCLR* 2007).

ELIZABETH SPENCER is the author of eight short story collections and nine novels, including *The Voice at the Back Door* (McGraw-Hill, 1956), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1957. Born in Mississippi, Spencer moved to North Carolina in 1986 and taught at UNC Chapel Hill until her retirement in 1992. She is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Award of Merit Medal for the Short Story from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the North Carolina Award for Literature. See Terry Roberts's article on Spencer's play *For Lease or Sale* and Gary Richards's sidebar essay on her play *Light in the Piazza* in *NCLR* 2009, and Spencer's own essay, "Look Homeward, Angel: Of Ghosts, Angels, and Lostness," in *NCLR* 2003.

How fitting that Elizabeth Spencer should be the 2013 winner of the Rea Award for the Short Story in recognition of her seven decades of contributions to the short story, just as her new collection, *Starting Over*, arrived in bookstores. This award, established by Michael M. Rea and managed by his widow, Elizabeth Rea, was created to encourage short story authors and to give recognition to a form often overshadowed by novels. Writers Richard Ford, Tom Franklin, and Lee Smith, jurors for the 2013 Rea Award, offered the following citation with the award:

Elizabeth Spencer is a permanent and treasured part of the American short story vocabulary. Her stories sparkle with acute and often startling intelligence. They are alert to the otherwise unobserved, vital nuances of our most secret selves. They are witty, frequently mordant, emotionally thorough, and both far-ranging and surprising in their sympathies and in their sharp vision of where our human accounts come due.*

As a master of the short story form, Spencer continues to offer her readers fresh perspectives about familial connections in *Starting Over*. Those who have read her other collections will see echoes of her favorite themes: the unknowable hearts of even our closest relatives, the way a memory of a loved one can form a veil, how the pondering of a mystery can overwhelm a person, and how a person can become submerged in a still pool of time.

In "Return Trip," set in Asheville, NC, Spencer plays with Thomas Wolfe's "you can't go home again" theme as distant cousins try to recall what happened during a

misspent night together many years before. The protagonist's husband wants to go forward – away from old family stories, but a cousin's visit returns them all to Mississippi where the mystery began. In contrast to Wolfe's admonishment, Patricia dangles her feet in the New River only to be swept back to the Mississippi voices of her family and youth while the distant cousin disappears into the future, deciding that he, indeed, can't go home again. What makes Spencer such an exquisite crafter of tales is that the ending is satisfying without a resolution. And the mystery remaining seems completely appropriate.

Another mystery awaits the protagonist in "The Boy in the Tree." Does Wallace see a boy munching peanuts and dressed in his own childhood clothing, or does he just imagine that he sees this boy? What Spencer asks us to consider is whether or not that distinction even matters, as long we are reflective enough to winkle out the message in the vision. Wallace does care to puzzle through meanings: "He would wonder now if happiness always came in packages, wrapped up in time. Try to extend the time, and the package got stubborn. Not wanting to be opened, it just sat and remained the same" (43).

Another mysterious boy haunts the protagonist in "On the Hill." Eva's urge is to help the boy, yet her husband cautions her to stay away from the boy's family and not to interfere. Again, Spencer helps us understand Eva's conflicted feelings by taking us inside her head and her heart since she (having recently had a miscarriage)

* Quoted from the Rea Award press release "Elizabeth Spencer is Winner of 2013 Rea Award for the Short Story": [web](#).

so wants to care for the little boy. This quiet story with its speculative plot resonates because we've all pondered the lives of casual acquaintances or wished we could help a lost child, and we've all been caught up in the social boundaries that keep us from confronting neighbors.

Divorce is the context for "Rising Tide," a tale of a single parent and her daughter. In this story, the mother and daughter are both testing the perceptions of racial barriers as they navigate the new phases of their lives and their changed relationship. Despite "a thin line of small quarrels between them," mother and daughter do manage to start over (82). The mother, a classic Spencer protagonist, moves forward with caution, but her keen sense of humor and innate courage keep her on track. In another tale of divorce, "Sightings," a man's daughter suddenly turns up at his house, having left her mother's house. Much to the surprise of the father, he and his daughter let an accident that haunted them fade away as they bumble forward happily and forge an alliance.

The protagonist in "Blackie" has also started a new life in a second marriage with a husband, a father-in-law, three stepsons, and a dog to care for and to make her feel needed. Called back into the past by a plea from her irascible ex-husband for a visit before he dies, Emily reconnects with her son. He later turns up at her new family's house, where he's made to feel most unwelcome by her stepsons. Has Emily become like Blackie, the loyal dog, there just to do the bidding of her husband and the

three stepsons? Or will she and her husband create a more inclusive family as she stands up for her son? One can't help but hope she'll find a way to make her son a more important part of her life, but Spencer never turns away from the complexity of family life and split loyalties and the sometimes tenuous ties between parent and child, so it's up to the reader to imagine the family's future.

The collection ends as it began, with a story about cousins, one of whom returns to his uncle's house where he spent his childhood summers. As a child who lost his mother and whose father is emotionally distant, Rob felt he wasn't quite a part of his uncle's family, yet he is drawn back to attend his cousin's wedding. As he strolls through the house recalling those distant summers, Spencer shows us his loneliness and longing:

Sometimes alone with his aunt he had sat on the floor near enough to lean against her and at times she would stop stitching and bend over to muss his hair. He might be discouraged at some way they had acted down below and she might know that without his saying anything because when she touched him, she would press him encouragingly and say: "How's Rob? Bless your heart." He liked having his heart blessed. (194)

As "The Wedding Visitor," Rob does find what he was looking for during his return to the past, and we sense a person who leaves the wedding feeling more at home and complete than when he arrived.

One of Spencer's favorite themes – the elastic pull of the past and its way of either freeing or capturing a character may seem particularly Southern since

it was a favorite William Faulkner theme as well. But Spencer's characters, while Southern, seem more universal in their family connections and in their emotional reactions to the past. Having lived in Italy and Canada as well as the South, Spencer seems able to keep Southern characters true to their settings, yet lift the context and themes of her stories away from regionalism.

Her characters are often the families of professionals that one might find in New England or the Midwest or anywhere, family members trying to love one another and succeeding as often as they fail. Many of her characters are quiet introverts who spend time reading and pondering the meaning of their experiences. Her fascination with the relationships among cousins gives her a special perspective from which to write about family issues: the cousins are aware of what goes on within the inside circle but view it from outside, offering the reader a feeling of being part of the narrative and of watching it unfold as well.

Much as some readers want a story to end with all the loose ends tied up, Spencer is unflinchingly honest about some of her characters' inability to determine the outcome or to unravel the mysteries they've set in motion during the plot. What she does do is create such complex, well-developed characters that the reader comes away from these stories with a sense that each tale is complete. The ragged edges of family love are left ragged, and the reader senses that he or she has a deeper understanding about "love just the way it is" (142). ■