

A WRY EXPLORATION OF MIDDLE-AGED WOMANHOOD

a review by Heather Bell Adams

Julia Ridley Smith. *Sex Romp Gone Wrong*. Blair, 2024.

HEATHER BELL ADAMS is the author of *Maranatha Road* (West Virginia University Press, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), which won the gold medal for the Southeast region in the Independent Publisher Book Awards, and *The Good Luck Stone* (Haywire Books, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* Fall 2022), which won Best Historical Novel Post-1900 in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards. Her short story "The Virgin of Guadalupe's Moon" won the 2021 Doris Betts Fiction Prize and appears in *NCLR* 2022. Her work also appears in *Raleigh Review*, *Still: The Journal*, *Reckon Review*, *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, *Broad River Review*, and elsewhere. She was named 2022 Piedmont Laureate and 2023 Pat Conroy Writer in Residence.

Sex Romp Gone Wrong, a debut story collection by Julia Ridley Smith, crackles with wit and wisdom. Smith approaches her subject matter with gentle fascination and a refreshing lack of judgment. Most of the twelve stories in the collection feature a middle-aged woman as the protagonist. These women are navigating the ups and downs of relationships, ranging from friends, children, spouses, and, yes, sexual partners. When it comes to sex, the stories remind us how the act can be awkward and uncomfortable, even funny under certain circumstances.

In terms of setting, Smith often evokes the American South, and several of the stories are explicitly situated in North Carolina. There's "static and Jesus" on the radio and signs advertising "Silver Queen corn, South Carolina peaches, cheap gas, and/or eternal life in HIM" (2).

In "Don't Breathe, Breathe," a title which will immediately remind certain readers about what it's like to get a mammogram, the protagonist, Delia, travels to Oak Island with friends for a fiftieth birthday celebration. As the women exchange stories of their first sexual encounters, one shares about a long-ago assault and how she felt abandoned by her friends. As Delia listens, she wrestles with how much of her own story to reveal to her daughters. She's struck by how the women seem to have no filter or concern for privacy, and yet, she wants to teach her daughters that they must look out for themselves. "What will protect them more? Telling them a cautionary tale? Or keeping

from them, for a bit longer, how shitty people can be?" (20)

In the title story, Liza desperately wants a second child. When she realizes her next ovulation coincides with her husband's "horrible IT convention," she "figure[s] what the heck" and plans a (not so) romantic rendezvous at a hotel (62). But it turns out their teenaged daughter, Grace, must tag along. Both Liza and Grace are point-of-view characters, and their voices, easily distinguishable from each other by their age differences, are equally charismatic. When Grace meets a guy at the hotel bar, the reader begins to worry what might happen to her. In these moments, Smith deftly balances suspense and humor.

Throughout many stories in the collection, Smith probes the dynamics between generations. Motherhood shows up again in "Flown," where a relationship between two teenagers highlights their mothers' estrangement.

Most of all, the collection is replete with entertaining capers and clever – but never cutesy – moments.

In "At the Arrowhead," a caregiver surreptitiously seeks revenge on her patient, who was involved in her family's downfall years earlier. The story shifts effortlessly from present to past, and the protagonist, Sharla, explains that many have tried and failed to break her. "She might be closing in on fifty, or maybe it's closing in on her, but she's strong" (25). She's been taking money – small bills only – from her patient and begins to worry when his wallet is not in its normal spot. But as



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the patient hands it to Sharla, trusting her to put it away, he explains that he hides it from his daughters, not her.

In "Cleopatra's Needle," one of the few stories not set in the American South, a young woman, new to New York City, has a questionable affair with the estranged husband of her mother's best friend. "I know it sounds tacky," she says, "but it's a very complex situation" (45).

When the protagonist of "Delta Foxtrot" embarks on an extramarital affair, she approaches the liaison with confidence and bold humor. "My dalliance with Preston wouldn't hurt my family," she says. "I'd make sure my husband didn't find out, and anyway, I was sure it wouldn't last long. I just had

responsibilities and appointments, toggling between her perceived duties to her husband, son, lover, and father.

The reader senses that Smith enjoyed putting this collection together, and there is a palpable sense of joy in some of the structural choices. For example, "Hot Lesbian Vampire Magic School" is written in an inventive three-act ballet format. Smith playfully imposes stage directions onto the central love story – to great effect. In "Cleopatra's Needle," the protagonist envisions four different scenarios for what might happen when she meets her "dull lover" on the rooftop. "Scenario One: Old-fashioned romance"; "Scenario Two: Even more old-fashioned romance"; "Scenario Three: Improbable

to get Preston out of my system, and the only way I knew to get a man out of your system was to keep having sex with him until it didn't seem fun anymore. I figured you didn't *have* to be married to do that" (131). As the story develops, she juggles her myriad

chivalry"; and "Scenario Four: Magic realism" (55–57).

"Tooth" has a song or chant-like rhythm, reading almost like a prose poem or as though it's set to music. "Tooth. Dull dagger-root. Sitting in the underwear drawer, under like treasure. Smoked yellow. Flesh-rot ringed. Hard as a rock and twice as old. Old as the hills and twice as ugly" (146). Smith's luxuriant use of language is also evident in her descriptions. In "Et tu, Miss Jones?" the protagonist describes an antique dealer: "I found charming his wavy silver hair and long patrician fingers, spatulate at the tips from years at the piano" (148). In the same story, the protagonist lingers over a piece of paper: "The paper was delicious, as buttery in the hands as good pastry in the mouth: ivory cotton linen, 24 lb., with a crown watermark" (148–49).

In its interrogation of the roles women play, the collection is at once irreverent and charming, thoughtful and perceptive. Considering its themes and use of quirky humor, *Sex Romp Gone Wrong* sits nicely beside the collections of Jill McCorkle. Fans of Kevin Wilson's work will also find much to admire, especially in Smith's delicate balance between absurdity and poignancy. Ultimately, the collection cuts to the root of how women in or approaching middle age can feel at once invisible and invincible. ■

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ABOVE Julia Ridley Smith reading at Scuppernon Books in Greensboro, NC, 3 Feb. 2024