

A JOURNEY THROUGH UNSEEN WORLDS

a review by Amber Knox

Michele Tracy Berger. *Doll Seed and Other Stories*. Aunt Lute Books, 2024.

AMBER KNOX received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English at East Carolina University. During her programs, she served as an *NCLR* intern and then editorial assistant and was promoted to senior editorial assistant in her last year. She also has an Associate in Arts degree from Pitt Community College.

MICHELE TRACY BERGER is the Eric and Jane Nord Family Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and director of the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities at Case Western Reserve University. Her work has been published in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including *Ms.* The title story of this collection received the 2019 Carl Brandon Kindred Award. She is the author of *Workable Sisterhood: The Political Journey of Stigmatized Women with HIV/AIDS* (Princeton University Press, 2004), *Black Women's Health: Paths to Wellness for Mothers and Daughters* (New York University Press, 2022), and the novella *Reenu-you* (2017, Flagstaff Books, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019). During her time as a professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at UNC Chapel Hill, she received a 2016–2017 Faculty Mentoring Award. Read an essay about her work in *NCLR Online* Fall 2022.

Michele Tracy Berger's new book, *Doll Seed and Other Stories*, is a captivating mix of tales that explore the trauma and strength of the human psyche. This collection covers a wide range of speculative genres, from science fiction to fantasy to ghost stories to satirical fairy tales. Through the fantastical settings and characters, the author addresses relatable issues as she brings her characters to life and immerses her audience in worlds both uncannily familiar and terrifyingly alien.

Within the pages of Berger's collection readers encounter worlds that serve as strange reflections of our own. In the title story, the protagonist is a doll named Chevella, who "didn't remember much of her life before; all she had now was the rubbery plastic odor of her, the mahogany sheen of her doll skin, and the intense yearning for love that yokes all doll forms to the human world" (113). Indeed, Chevella's personal experiences and the difficulties she faces along the way are easily relatable to humans, particularly her struggle to find her own path despite the ridicule and oppression of her fellow dolls. Chevella's strength as she deals with these common obstacles is empowering to the reader.

Berger's choice to tell this story through the eyes of a doll also creates a unique perspective on racial issues. The majority of Chevella's struggles stem from being a black doll in a segregated society, in which many people see her as "not a doll you need, or one you should

have" (141). Not only is Chevella different from the white and much more popular (and white) Missy Ann dolls, she is the only black doll in the toy store. She is treated very differently from the other dolls by both the Missy Anns and the customers. The Missy Anns even imply that Chevella is missing her "most important thing" (116), her *doll seed*, a doll's "essence" or "the extra ether, or star space" in them that lets them connect to and choose a human (119). This prejudice has a major impact on Chevella's sense of self and her personal choices, and she spends a large part of the story trying to overcome self-doubt. The personal conflict Chevella has to deal with because of this prejudice also serves as a provocative parallel to the doll test, a real-life study of the effects of segregation on children in which Chevella finds herself playing a significant role.

Personal strength and oppression are both recurring themes in this collection. In "Etta, Zora, and the First Serpent" the main character, Etta, faces both racial and gender inequality during the Harlem Renaissance. As a dancer at the Cotton Club she is degraded by both her boss and her co-worker Laney, whose lighter skin earns her more social acceptance and prestige than the other dancers despite her comparatively meager talent. Etta and her fellow dancers also have to contend with the unwanted attention of the Cotton Club's owner, an injustice that neither their boss nor society in general can be bothered

to protect them from. Etta is not only oppressed by her own unfair treatment, but also by her inability to protect others and the knowledge that "No one was looking out for them" (91). Her sense of powerlessness and the desire for justice in an unjust world drives her to become involved in a fictionalized Zora Neale Hurston's plans to summon a powerful spirit in an effort to "do something bold. Something that will speed things up" (89). Etta's job at the Cotton Club gives readers insight into yet another important part of Black history as does the inclusion of writer Zora Neale Hurston as a character and a catalyst for Etta's spiritual adventure. "Etta, Zora, and the First Serpent" is both a poignant look into the history of racial and gender relationships in America and a truly haunting and atmospheric fantastical story that displays a Lovecraftian level of horror and suspense.

The other stories in this collection address similar issues. In "Nussia," the characters come face to face not with the supernatural but the extraterrestrial. When Lindsay "wins" an alien, it is life-changing for her and her family. In the 1970s, the idea that an average Black family from the Bronx will be the first to host a visitor from another world seems groundbreaking. However, the reality is not what they expect. The media attention on the family brings not only fame but also racial prejudice and harassment. Nussia's



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arrival in an already contentious family situation also causes tension, as does Lindsay's own personal difficulties as she grows up and struggles to be seen for who she is. Lindsay's difficulties are mirrored by Nussia herself, who is also growing up but is now forced to do so in a world and culture that are not her own. In a heartbreaking scene Nussia herself states, "I'm not one of you. I'm on my own here. Do you understand?" (57). What these two girls need to be happy differs from what is expected of them by both their worlds, leaving Lindsay and Nussia fighting to overcome the pressures of their societies and to be seen. Over the course of the story, Lindsay embarks on a journey to better understand not only herself, but also the people and aliens around her, and in doing so encourages readers to do the same. As Lindsay states, "When

we can see that what is human is also sometimes what is alien, then we can begin to understand ourselves and them. All the good and the bad" (73).

The stories Berger collects in *Doll Seed and Other Stories* explore a wide range of experiences, but at their core they all present their readers with the same fundamental themes of the degrading effects of inequality and prejudice as well as the strength of human endurance. Berger's characters face monumental and sometimes otherworldly obstacles with a determination and personal strength that is inspiring. Between their powerful characters and atmospheric settings these tales are each stunning in their own right. Like any powerful spirit these stories refuse to be left behind. They continue to haunt the reader long after the book is finished. ■

ABOVE: Michele Tracy Berger with fellow NC fiction writer Marjorie Hudson after a reading at Flyleaf Books, Chapel Hill, NC, 11 Feb. 2025