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REVIEW: NOVEL

Tale of food and relationships feels half-baked

BY LIZZIE SKURNICK

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>>> The Whole World Over

Julia Glass

Pantheon / 528 pages / \$25.95

One might think that a novel spanning the art of cookery and Sept. 11 (or, as the Library of Congress has it, "1. Women cooks-Fiction. 2. September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001-Fiction.") might take its title with a decent pinch of salt as well. But Julia Glass' *The Whole World Over*, the follow-up to the National Book Award-winning *Three Junos*, means to live up to its title, double connotation and all. It's a tall order, and, like the "tent-sized" cake that Greenie, the novel's cook in question, bakes for her boss' nuptials, the book is multilayered, dense - and slathered with an ill-advised layer of frosting.

Like Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, *The Whole World Over* works within the modern urban canvas, where characters are connected by far fewer than six degrees. In *Three Junos*, Fenno McLeod, a Scottish expat cast down in Greenwich Village, is the unwitting satellite around which a motley crew - an acerbic critic slowly dying of AIDS, a single mother, McLeod's own scattered family - revolves. Fenno is back in *The Whole World Over*, his Bank Street bookstore now an unofficial town square where a new assemblage intersects and, ultimately, connects.

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First up are Greenie and restaurant owner Walter, who bond respectively as foodies and orphans - all their parents were killed in car crashes. Greenie's psychotherapist husband, Alan, subtly needles her profession, while Walter carries on a fruitless affair with Gordie, a very rich - and very married - lawyer. Yet another car crash has stripped a young woman, Saga, of both her memory and a marriage, and she's moved on to a semi-life of rescuing abandoned animals. Car crashes aside, it's not a stretch to feel that Glass' characters are wrecked too, and now cast, through choice and circumstance, outside the thrum and hum of normal life.

However, while Maupin's *Tales of the City* is a glittering web, shimmering here and there with delicate strands of connection, Glass' is closer to a city wrenched of its fourth wall, the reader able to peer into apartments lit like dioramas. Sure, paths cross, but the haphazard lurching spirals away from a sensible destination. Greenie's character stuck? Send her to Texas to work for a chicken-fried statesman from Santa Fe, N.M. Alan's life insufficiently complicated? Get him a son he never knew he had. Not much happening with Walter? How about he takes in his slovenly teenage nephew? Saga's got a secret from the past? Spoiler alert - she was pregnant when her car wrapped around that tree. This is not plot, alas; it's the absurd gasp of a soap opera clocking in at its 10th season.

Glass' characters often seem clumsily depicted as well. A German accent is rendered with attendant "vills" and "vasses"; Fenno's black assistant, Oneeka, prefaces her few sentences with "Girl"; the black chauffeur has a penchant for "man"; Walter's laid-back nephew, Scott, prefers "dude." Each single woman in her thirties is dying for either a child or a husband (to be fair, so is a gay character, Stephen); Walter is witty and fab-five ready - filed under "Here and Queer!" in the Greenwich Village phone book. Greenie and Alan's son, 4-year-old George, is prone to charming mispronunciations like "scale" for "stale," the kind of thing endearing only to a parent (or an author). Glass can and does turn a fabulous phrase - describing butter as that "Protean substance as wondrous and essential to a pastry chef as fire had been to early man" is genius - but she does not lavish the same on her characters.

The first plane that slams into the World Trade Center is an inarguably radical *deus ex machina* for this inchoate spread, and, as the conclusion of *The Whole World Over* shakes out, ultimately tasteless. While the national tragedy fractures the rest of the country, it functions as a kind of "two minutes in the closet" game for the novel's characters, bringing Fenno to Walter, Greenie back to Alan, and Saga into a life of independence. Undoubtedly, Glass means to suggest how our bonds are both tenuous and enduring, but couldn't a blackout have given Fenno a chance to tell Walter he thought he was hot? Ultimately, this whole world is, simply, overdone.

Lizzie Skurnick, a Baltimore writer, is the editor of Old Hag, a literary blog at www.theoldhag.com.

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