



Sanctity, schmanctity

A writer finds that America's present definition of marriage is hardly a sacred thing.
See Essay, page 13.

Reject Measure A, and our transportation system falls apart. Pass it, and this county land will fill with sprawl and traffic congestion. Some choice.

A desperate measure



BY **COSMO GARVIN**

PAGE **20**

Desperate longings

The Curse of the Appropriate Man

Lynn Freed
Harcourt Inc.

"Life would be barren without men." So says the

narrator of "Twilight," one of 15 short stories in local writer Lynn Freed's new collection. The obverse of this, of course, is that life would lack a certain something also without women.

by
Shawn A. Miller

From whichever direction the equation is approached, it's the coming together of these two complements—and the desperate longings and distances that persist despite all efforts—that holds our interest and fills the landscape of Freed's new collection with compelling, though often pitiable, characters.

A UC Davis professor of English, Freed populates *The Curse of the Appropriate Man*

with female narrators and protagonists—a group that includes innocent girls, an out-of-sorts exchange student, a cripple, a Holocaust survivor, unhappy wives, house servants and mildly to moderately deranged mothers.

The lives of these often canny women are filled with men who have little to recommend them, like the two-time losers and cheapskates who watch bestial pornography and collect gloves or spend time as street musicians. And while Freed shows a deft touch in her collection conveying the quotidian—

the lovelessness of marriage; life's long, drab haul; and the everyday sexual distortions and mutations that result from the erotic impulse—her more compelling work comes when she creates offbeat characters and circumstances.

In "The Mirror," a 17-year-old girl takes on the job of housekeeper for a husband, his dying wife and their young daughter, Sarah. The wife's misery and venom has little effect on the indifferent housekeeper. The husband, an old man, places a mirror in the housekeeper's room in which she takes to looking at herself naked. Before long, the two make a ritual of lovemaking on Saturdays even though the housekeeper finds her employer old and ugly. The wife dies eventually, and when she does, the housekeeper is standing nude before her mirror with Sarah clutching her feet, weeping, and the old man watching.

In the title story, "The Curse of the Appropriate Man," the protagonist has "reached a time in her life when she wants a man with a few bad habits. Something unexpected." She ends up dating a bearded Bavarian in the 17th year of his doctoral dissertation. His subject, he tells her, involves "the dual fields of ecology and Chinese."

The Bavarian feeds her squirrel in his studio apartment, in which kitchen appliances dangle from the ceiling and lower via a pulley. Although she tires of him and other colorful losers, the protagonist resigns herself to gross imperfection and "the death of the heart."

Freed's new collection is filled with compelling, though often pitiable, characters.

In "Selina Comes to the City," a less quirky and more heart-rending selection, Freed tells the story of a black nanny and her struggles. Selina has a son; a dead sister; a drunken, manipulative mother; and a more or less indifferent employer. Selina's life is empty, destitute. "My time is nothing. My sadness is nothing. I am nothing. I know that," Selina prays.

The reader aches for Selina, can feel the stifled air of her suffocating existence in large part because the story is long enough (21 pages) for the reader to develop an attachment to her.

Some of Freed's stories flit by too quickly, without obvious hooks or reasons to care. Others are barely stories; they're more like vignettes, and they work wonderfully as such—when stories feel invented rather than described.

POET'S CORNER

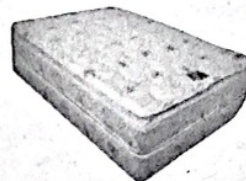
Whiskey Yankee Tango Bravo

I scrape down the inside of my skull,
hollowing it out like a mask
of slinky tissue and bone,
and I am my own taxidermist.
I smolder within the velvet
log that is burned and cut by an adze
to float down the river
of never having known.
Here is where my cranium will
be carved
from a solid block of wood.
My eyes will be glass, my skin
stretched tight,
hair follicles carefully glued in place.
Will my tongue rest, or will my
ears vibrate
to some strange new music?
It is true that I died in that jungle
that is so far away,
blown apart as if I had actually
been there.

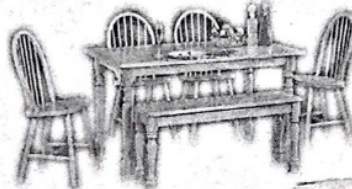
—David Humphreys
Stockton

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