

# BOOKS

Review:

## Victory Over Japan

Short Stories by Ellen Gilchrist. Published by Little, Brown and Company, 1984.

Author Ellen Gilchrist introduces us to some delightfully eccentric and unforgettable Southern women in this fine collection of 14 short stories.

In the first group of three stories we encounter Rhoda, first as a determined third grader, then as an incorrigible cigarette-smoking 14-year-old, and finally as a soon-to-be-divorced young woman, glad to be rid of the husband she married for his money.

In the next bunch of stories, "Crazy, Crazy Now Showing Everywhere," we follow the fortunes and misfortunes in New Orleans of Lady Margaret who believes people aren't even supposed to look at her unless she tells them to. We also meet King, who ran away to a commune in Texas when he was a teenager and now lives at the family beach house and feeds funny mushrooms to his unsuspecting uncle. Later it turns out that King is the son of Miss Crystal, the irrepressible spoiled heroine of the final group of stories.

In the next two stories we get to know a 20-year-old who pulls off a little robbery in New Orleans to buy a ticket to join her lover in California. She writes him a poignant love letter:

*"I want to go to that chocolate place in San Francisco the minute I get there. And lie down with you in the dark for a million years. Or in the daylight. I love you. Nora Jane."*

But he doesn't meet her; and when Nora Jane gets to his address, he's not there. On her own in a strange city, she finds a rich

new lover whose bookstore she first tries to rob. Later on she has a brief fling with her old boyfriend. In "The Double Happiness Bun" Nora Jane discovers she is pregnant with twins and joyously unsure of who is the father.

The last five stories in the collection begin with "Miss Crystal's Maid Name Traceleen, She's Talking, She's Telling Everything She Knows." Traceleen takes care of 3-year-old Crystal Anne and works for Miss Crystal who is as good to her as her own sister. Traceleen's auntie Mae worked for the family for years and has prepared Traceleen for life with these rich spoiled white folks whose money does not make them happy. In the last story Crystal shares with Traceleen her deepest memory from childhood when she was eight and her 12-year-old brother fooled her into trading all her best possessions for a cardboard plane he made.

*"There were foot pedals for his feet and a steering wheel and a dashboard with all sorts of dials on it. It was a special kind of plane where the pilot is also the bombardier and Phelan was flying over Japan, dropping bombs on cities and ammunition dumps. . . . I almost fainted with envy when I saw him. It drove me crazy. Finally, I went over and asked him if I could fly it and he said no, it was against the law because I wasn't a pilot. So I went to my room and got my new Monopoly set and brought it out and offered to trade. 'No,' he said. . . . All day I kept adding to the things. . . . and still Phelan flew on and on as if I wasn't even there. . . . Finally. . . he got up from the pilot's seat and took the. . . things that interested him and we shook hands on the deal. So Phelan took my stuff and I sat down at the plane and reached for*

*the steering wheel. It was only an old piece of cardboard he had painted. I put my feet down on the pedals. They were two old shoeboxes with cardboard springs."*

*"Traceleen, are you listening? Can you hear me? This is everything I know about love I'm telling you. Everything I know about everything."*

Ellen Gilchrist lives in New Orleans and speaks Southern fluently and with idiomatic familiarity. She judiciously uses childhood recollections to add an emotionally satisfying depth to her characterizations of those fascinating child-women, these modern Scarlet O'Haras who embark on distinctly 20th century escapades and live idiosyncratic lifestyles. Gilchrist is the rare writer who makes me laugh out loud. *Victory Over Japan* is fun reading from a new Southern voice who has all the classic story telling forms down pat and who makes you glad to spend a few hours reading her wonderful stories.

—Lois Wadsworth

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**Weekly Eye Opener**  
by Larry Deckman

(Taken from the book, *Isaac Asimov's Book of Facts*): "The Amazon River pushes so much water into the Atlantic that, more than a hundred miles at sea, off the mouth of the river, one can dip fresh water out of the ocean and drink it."

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