

entertainment

Gaudi Afternoon filled with mysteries of gender

Sketchy characters inhabit Barcelona cityscape in Barbara Wilson's new comic novel

Gaudi Afternoon by Barbara Wilson. Seattle: The Seal Press, 1990. 172 pages. \$8.95.

In Barbara Wilson's new novel, *Gaudi Afternoon*, the question dogging the female sleuth is not so much who-done-it as who-is-s/he.

Nearly all the characters in this comic mystery belie their appearances. Women are mistaken for *señors*; the men cross-dress; the protagonist dreams of hermaphrodites; one of the mothers used to be a father. Cassandra Reilly, the book's protagonist, must read the mixed signals of gender in order to grasp the characters' motives and solve the puzzle.

Gaudi Afternoon is set in Barcelona, in and among buildings designed by architect Antonio Gaudi

in the early part of this century. These stone structures, modern and fantastical, provide a palpable setting for a book in which no one turns out quite as she or he seems.

BOOKS

ANNDÉE HOCHMAN

Wilson, author of three mysteries featuring feminist sleuth Pam Nilsen, as well as *Cows and Horses* and *Miss Venezuela*, debuts a new heroine in this novel. Cassandra Reilly, a globe-wandering, wise-cracking lapsed Catholic, earns her living translating Spanish, chiefly South American novels.

At the novel's opening, Reilly is working on the translation of a Venezuelan novel in the style of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Wilson weaves passages of this imagined book through the story of *Gaudi Afternoon*, and her parody of the magic-realism style is both subtle and deft.

Reilly's translation project is interrupted by a call from flamboyant Frankie Stevens, who wants to locate her husband, Ben. She believes he's somewhere in Barcelona. What sounds like a straightforward sleuthing mission soon grows into a structure as complicated as a Gaudi blueprint.

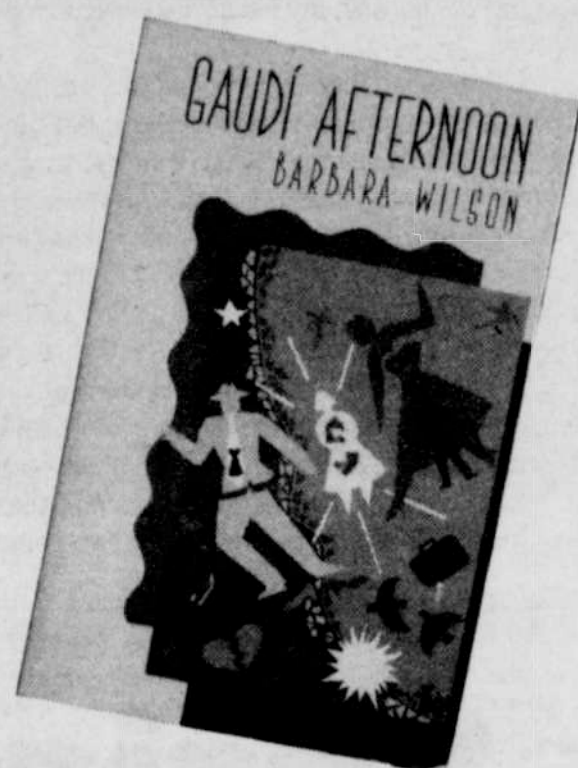
Reilly, who earns her keep discerning meanings, is momentarily stumped as the trail to Ben leads her to a New Age lesbian foot therapist named April, April's body-building lover, a six-year-old girl and a saxophone-playing ex-New Yorker whose connection to the others remains mysterious.

With each turn of the spiralling plot, Reilly's detective work brings her into more unreadable territory, where the signifiers of gender turn slippery and the characters' motives blur.

Wilson's writing is crisp, the dialogue often funny and the characterizations sharp in the manner of an excellent pen-and-ink drawing, with singular traits skillfully rendered. Yet they somehow fail to take shape as fully dimensional people who command our empathy.

In fact, the most interesting characters are not those involved directly in the mystery, but two of Reilly's friends in Barcelona, a woman who designs fantastical playhouses for children and craves a baby of her own, and a hair stylist who provides Reilly with after-hours adventures.

Wilson knows how to tell a story, and this



one hums along, delivering snippets of architectural description without slowing the jaunty plot. Yet the book lacks the pulse-pounding suspense of a true thriller, and Wilson doesn't pursue the underlying ideas far enough to make them the novel's true substance.

The final impression is of a mystery/comic fabric draped over the framework of a serious discussion about gender, motherhood and the politics of sex-roles. Wilson makes her conclusion clear in a revelation that Reilly has during a drunken moment in a bar:

Afterwards I could never say what it was I experienced just then. But it was as if I were at a masquerade ball and everyone, at the very same moment, lifted their masks, and I saw gender for what it was, something that stood between us and our true selves. Something that we could take off and put on at will. Something that was, strangely, like a game.

Because the characters, despite their complications of gender, ultimately seem like types rather than people, Reilly's vision seems more grandiose than true, something like the passages in the book she's translating.

But she is a promising protagonist, with her ironic wit and globe-scouring lifestyle. This book marks her debut as a detective; perhaps readers can look forward to future mysteries in which both character and ideas can flourish in a landscape as rich as the Barcelona of *Gaudi Afternoon*.

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When I was in the military they gave me a medal for killing two men, and a discharge for loving one.

—Leonard Matlovich, Vietnam

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signing copies of
MY COUNTRY, MY RIGHT TO SERVE

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1990
5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

MARY ANN HUMPHREY was a Captain in the United States Army Reserves for nine years, with a perfect record and many honors - until she was instantly discharged when it was discovered she was lesbian.

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