

SLOW RIVER

Nicola Griffith

Writing a novel is a daunting task. The author must create a whole world, populated with people made up out of whole cloth. And these people and their world must be written about in such a way that the reader actually cares about their lives and what happens in their made-up world.

In *Slow River*, Nicola Griffith creates a fasci-

Books

nating and mesmerizing world existing in the not-quite-distant-enough-for-comfort future. It is the world of Lore van de Oest, daughter of a wealthy and protected family whose fortune was made by developing and patenting the genetically engineered micro-organisms used worldwide in an attempt to control rampaging pollution.

Lore's sheltered life is shattered when she is kidnapped on her 18th birthday. For reasons beyond understanding, her family chooses not to pay the ransom that would free her. Believing that her captors are about to kill her, Lore kills one of the kidnappers and escapes. She finds herself alone, naked and bloodied, on the dark streets of a European city.

Spanner, a woman who lives on the dark fringes that encircle every society, hears Lore's

for *Slow River*; the judges made an excellent choice.

(Del Rey, 1996; \$11 paper.)

TOWARD AMNESIA

Sarah Van Arsdale

There is a particular pain, a knowing yet baffled, clear yet confused, numb yet doubled-over kind of pain that one suffers when a lover walks out. *Toward Amnesia*, by Sarah Van Arsdale, tells the story of a marine biologist whose lover of five years has left her for another woman. The young scientist is plunged into the all-encompassing world of that particular pain. She stays in the house they shared. She creates rules to govern when and how often she can drive past her former lover's new home. She tries to reconcile her ex's claims of ongoing love for her with the woman's all-too-obvious absence from her day-to-day life. The world as she knew it, counted on it and believed in it has ceased to exist. Her only world is that particular pain.

She finally decides her only option is to forget everything, to create a life of amnesia. She packs up the house, throws a few things into the car, closes the joint bank accounts and starts to drive. She lives in the South, so she drives north. She changes her name, begins drinking her coffee black.

By chance she stops on an island near Canada. Fortuitously, summer has just arrived and there is an old cabin available for rent. She puts up curtains, finds work and works to forget.

Toward Amnesia is a beautifully written novel, and its premise is nearly universal. Unfortunately, Van Arsdale sets it up so that everything falls too easily into place. It just happens to be summer; there just happens to be a cabin; work just happens to be available. When winter comes, a better cabin just happens to appear. In real life, running away is never this easy.

(Riverhead Books, 1997; \$11 paper.)

WORKING PARTS

Lucy Jane Bledsoe

Lori Taylor, the protagonist in Lucy Jane Bledsoe's new novel, *Working Parts*, can fix anything: lawnmowers, cars, toasters, bikes. Her passion is cycling, and she supports herself by working as a bike mechanic. Lori Taylor's secret shame, however, is that Lori Taylor is illiterate. So she makes a deal with Mickey, her friend and work partner. Mickey, who has never been kissed, will find someone to kiss, and Lori will learn to read.

As the story unfolds, Lori is assigned a tutor through the library's adult literacy program. Her tutor is an older woman, married, and clearly comfortably well-

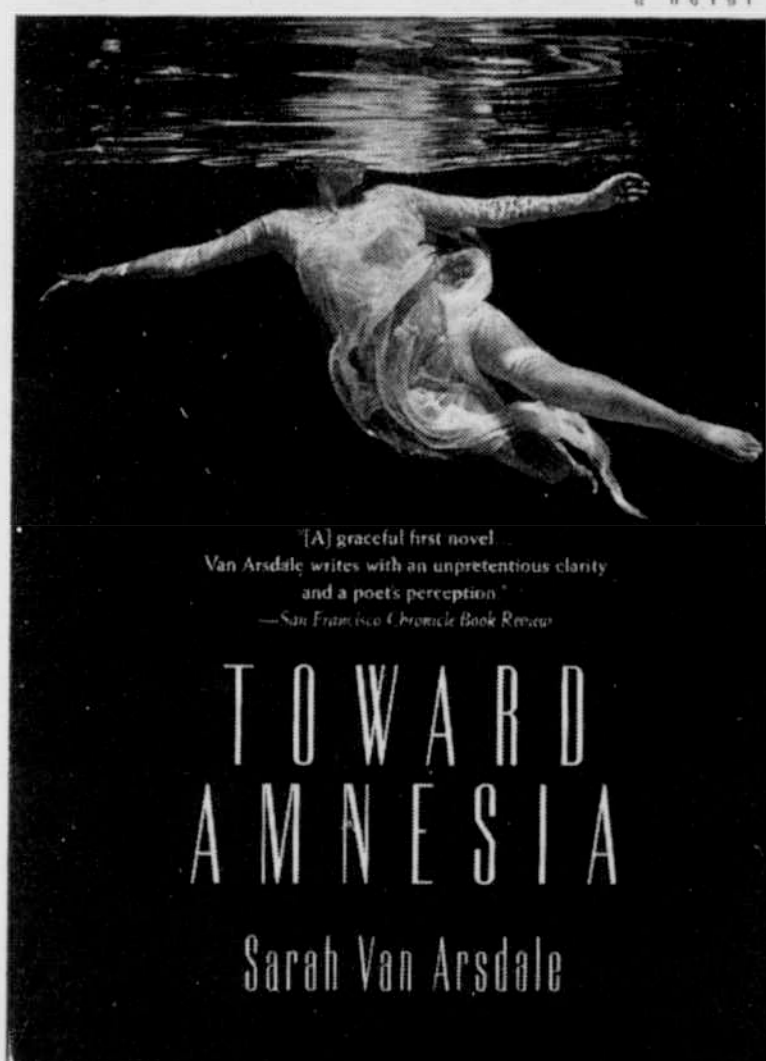
off. The relationship between this woman and working-class, grease-under-the-fingernails, lesbian Lori gets off to a very rocky start.

Lori's pride and shame sabotage her efforts to learn to read and generally wreak havoc with her social life. She meets and begins dating a graphic designer whose sense of self is tied to financial success and her degree from a prestigious university. Lori tells lie after lie in an attempt to maintain the relationship. Mickey finds someone to love, and their friendship starts to unravel. And she still has to deal with that upper-middle class literacy tutor who could not possibly understand the pain in Lori's life.

In the end, after much pain and angst all around, honesty and true friendship triumph. Left to stand on its own, the ending of this book would seem improbable if not completely unbelievable, but here, somehow, it works. Bledsoe has created characters the reader cares about.

(Seal Press, 1997. \$12 paper. Bledsoe will read from her novel at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W Burnside St., at 7:30 pm on Tuesday, July 15.)

Reviews by Kristine Chatwood



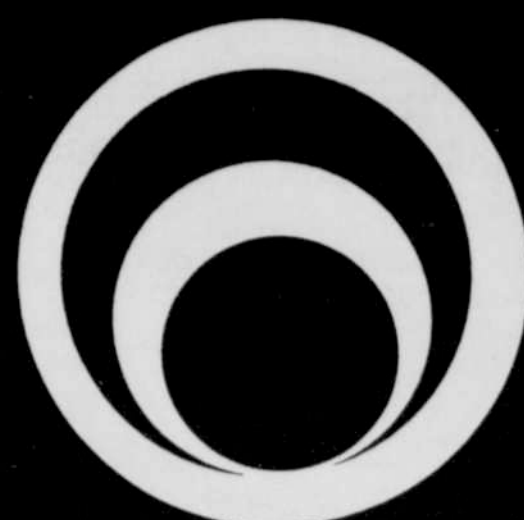
muffled cry for help, recognizes her from the constant news coverage of the kidnapping, and takes Lore back to her apartment. She gives Lore shelter, food, clothes, medical care and a new identity. In return, Lore, once again a captive, becomes Spanner's lover and partner in crime.

The book alternates chapters dealing with Lore's current life and chapters that reveal her past and the story of her family. As Lore struggles to build a new, different life, she also must come to terms with the reality of her past. She must confront the difference between her perception of her family and dawning realizations about who and what that family is. And she must decide what kind of person she is and what kind of person she wants to be.

She can choose to stay with Spanner, who both loves and hates her, or she can build her own life—a task that requires Lore to assume the identity of a dead woman, take over that woman's life and discover her own true self by living as someone else.

Slow River is about truth—learning what it is and coming to terms with it—the truth about ourselves, our families and our lives.

Griffith received a Lambda Literary Award



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