

Where the Ordinary Meets the Miraculous

Aimee Bender's striking, surreal stories

WILLFUL CREATURES. Short stories by Aimee Bender. Doubleday, 2005. Hardcover, 22.95.

Aimee Bender, amazing, is only on her third book. *Willful Creatures* follows *The Girl With the Flammable Skirt*, her first short story collection, and *An Invisible Sign of My Own*, her first novel. I'm almost glad it's taken me until now to catch on; now that I know what I've been missing, I can dole the two previous books out to myself, making them last until she writes a fourth. She's that good.

Willful Creatures is a slim volume made up of three sets of five stories, stories with titles like "I Will Pick Out Your Ribs (From My Teeth)" and "Off." The titles are often just a word or two that encapsulate the dreamscape within. And the stories thus encapsulated are astonishing, flowing easily from a familiar world to one in which potatoes turn to babies, or a small man in a cage can be bought in a pet store.

In "Job's Jobs," God puts a gun to a writer's head and tells him he can't write anymore. The writer becomes a painter; God appears with a dagger. The painter becomes an actor; God turns up with a bayonet, and the dance continues to its frightful end, a beautiful story about creation tangled with a horror tale about fear. Many of the stories in *Willful Creatures* pull off a similar hat trick, combining emotions that seem unlikely bedfellows into a striking and surreal whole.

Every one of these 15 stories is a gem. From the ten men who think they're fated to die in "Death Watch," the first story, to the magical babies of "Hymn" that close the book, Bender has created heartbreaking character sketches out of the strange, small moments in life. What makes her stories so unexpectedly striking is the way she turns feelings to imagery, but never lets her surreal elements weight the stories down. Two pumpkinhead parents have a child with an iron for a head; Bender wastes no time explaining the backstory — pumpkinheads? — but gives us instead a portrait of



a loving and confused family. The hero of "The Leading Man" has nine fingers in the shape of keys, for which he finds keyholes as he goes through life. The 10th is an ordinary finger, like a piece of himself about which he has no questions.

Bender's perceptive and enchanting tales have something in common with those of Kelly Link, whose *Stranger Things Happen* is one of the most delicious, lovely short story collections I've ever read. It's not just the form, though — it's the straightforward way the impossible and the magical appear in stories by both women. I closed each book feeling like I'd read something that should be treated like a new fairy tale, a bedtime story for adults that resonates through the ages. Sometimes, *Willful Creatures* seems strangely like a talisman, a reminder that we weigh ourselves down; if we could just put things away, let it all go, turn our faces up and out again, we'd be fine. **EW**

Willful Creatures will be released Tue., Aug. 16. Aimee Bender reads at Powell's City of Books in Portland on Wed., Aug. 24.

BOOK NOTES: Ian Avi (*Motivation and Toleration*) and Daniel Scott Buck (*The Greatest Show on Earth*) read at 7:30 pm 8/11, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... Eric Stone gives a Writers Workshop at 7:30 pm 8/11, Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland ... Chuck Klosterman (*Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs, Killing Yourself to Live*) reads at 7:30 pm 8/15, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... Periel Aschenbrand (*The Only Bush I Trust is My Own*) reads at 7:30 pm 8/15, Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland ... Nina Shengold (*Clearcut*) reads at 7:30 pm 8/16, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... The Lane County Fair Oregon Authors' Table features appearances by 36 Oregon authors from Aug. 16-21: Eric Alan Fri. & Sat. 11 am-2 pm; Michael Barker Thu. 11 am-2 pm, Fri. 8-11 pm; Lois Barton Wed. 11 am-2 pm; Carol Ann Bassett Sat. 11 am-2 pm; Judith Berg Wed. 5-8 pm; Joe Blakely Tue. 11 am-10 pm, Wed. 11 am-8 pm, Thu. 2-10 pm, Fri. 11 am-8 pm, Sat. 11 am-11 pm, Sun. 11 am-5 pm; Jo Brew Thu. 2-5 pm; Jane Capron Tue. 2-5 pm, Wed. 11 am-2 pm, Sun. 2-5 pm; Joe Casey Fri. 5-8 pm, Sat. 8-11 pm, Sun. 11 am-2 pm; Larry Cherosky Thu. 5-10 pm; Harriet and Charlotte Childress Fri. 8-11 pm, Sat. 2-5 pm; Norma Comrada Fri. 2-5 pm; Sybilla Cook Thu. 2-5 pm; Rich Crane Tue. & Thu. 8-10 pm; Kurt Cyrus Sat. 11 am-5 pm; Carola Dunn Wed. 2-5 pm, Sun. 2-9 pm; Eric Emery Sun. 5-9 pm; Frog Tue. through Thu. 8-10 pm, Sat. 8-11 pm, Sun. 5-9 pm; Sheri Greatwood Tue. & Fri. 11 am-2 pm; Melissa Hart Sat. 5-8 pm; Ann Herrick Fri. 2-5 pm; Mark Jackson Tue. & Fri. 11 am-5 pm, Sat. 5-8 pm, Sun. 11 am-2 pm; Patricia Jacobs Thu. 11 am-2 pm; Robert Kono Wed. & Sat. 2-5 pm, Fri. 5-8 pm, Sun. 5-9 pm; Ginnie Lo Thu. 5-8 pm; Cathryn Martz Tue. & Thu. 5-8 pm; Larry McKaughan Tue. 11 am-5 pm; Zed Merrill, Wed. 5-10 pm; Ken Ross Wed., Thu. & Sun. 2-5 pm, Fri. 11 am-2 pm; Margriet Ruurs Tue. 5-8 pm; Nedra Sterry Thu. & Sun. 11 am-2 pm; William Sullivan Tue. 11 am-5 pm, Wed. 2-10 pm, Thu. & Fri. 11 am-8 pm, Sat. 11 am-11 pm, Sun. 11 am-9 pm; Shirley Tallman Wed. 5-10 pm, Sat. 5-11 pm; Bob Ticer Fri. 5-11 pm; Bob Welch Wed. 11 am-2 pm ... Karen Fisher (*A Sudden Country*) reads at 7:30 pm 8/18, Powell's on Burnside, Portland ... The Oregon Writers Colony presents Kaasten Alonso (*Core*) at 7 pm 8/22, Powell's, Beaverton ... Steven Hager reads and signs *The Octopus Conspiracy* at 6 pm 8/24, Tsunami Books ... Aimee Bender reads from *Willful Creatures* at 7:30 pm 8/24, Powell's on Burnside, Portland.

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