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winter reading 2005-6

the vile depths of the sadistic magistrate's monster lair. Eventually, our hero achieves a vaguely satisfying epiphany, the possibility of sweet closure and the beginning of the greening of Mr. Muo.

Describing his character's postponed loss of innocence, Dai Sijie writes, "Muo's first copulation, which proceeds in textbook fashion, is in danger of turning into a doctoral thesis."

Imagine sly Vladimir Nabokov, droll Lewis Carroll and indefatigable Miguel Cervantes beaming at the arrival of their new colleague. Born in China, Dai Sijie has lived and worked in France since 1984.

— David Johnson

his publisher, you will note the razor-sharp wit of the 78-year old writer we so admire:

"He had the notable vice of a smart appearance. He had just turned twenty-nine and knew four languages and had three international master's degrees, unlike the first president-for-life, his paternal grandfather, who became an empirical journalist after making a fortune as a white slaver."

This tightly-woven novella (113 small pages) is resplendent and deserving of a careful reading. It is arguably a masterpiece. But if not, it's simply one more illuminating work by one of the world's great writers, nothing more. — Lois Wadsworth

LIVELY METAPHOR

Memories of My Melancholy Whores by Gabriel García Márquez. Translated by Edith Grossman. Knopf, 2005. Hardcover, \$20. **A New York Times Notable Book of the Year 2005.**

Since I discovered the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Colombian-born Gabriel García Márquez in the early 1970s, I have longed to express in print my feelings about this remarkable writer, who is credited with creating a style enraptured critics called "magical realism." Although I have read many of his novels and found them compelling, I have not yet finished his astonishing memoir, *Living to Tell the Tale* (Knopf, 2003). In the first of three projected volumes, García Márquez makes clear how his life has influenced his work, particularly his fictions.

Memories of My Melancholy Whores seems to me to be a highly sophisticated metaphor for the riches and sorrows of a writer acknowledging the muse(s) who have attended his work. I offer in evidence a quote attributed to Julius Caesar, which appears in a late chapter: "In the end, it is impossible not to become what others believe you are."

An unnamed journalist and lifelong bachelor in a large city comes to his 90th birthday with one wish: to experience one night of love with an adolescent virgin. Now this proposition even surprises the madam who has long serviced his needs with a variety of women. Nevertheless, she secures a young woman, and the night of love arrives. The night turns into a year, but consummation never arrives. Instead, the old man finds himself for the first time deeply in love, not only with the girl who sleeps through their nights together, but with all those who came before her.

Like the second word in "magical realism," which is often ignored, the tale is rooted in a reality that includes an old house that's falling apart and our hero's interactions with his newspaper. In this brief portrait of

O HOLY URINE SAMPLES

An Idiot Girl's Christmas: True Tales from the Top of the Naughty List by Laurie Notaro. Villard Books, 2005. Hardcover, \$14.95.

Every year, as the holidays approach, my stomach slowly twists into garland-like knots as I ponder what predicaments God feels I can handle. I suffer through visions of drunken arguments, judgmental looks from family members, an extreme case of road rage and the intense fear of braving the mall. Luckily this year, before the annual madness set in, an antidotal handbook fell into my needy hands. *An Idiot Girl's Christmas* is just what the doctor, or shall I say Ol' St. Nick, ordered. *The New York Times* best-selling local author of *The Idiot Girl's Action-Adventure Club*, Laurie Notaro, blesses us this season with 12 hilarious tales of holiday woe.

"Have Yourself a Kmart Little Christmas" is Notaro's Christmas Eve recounting of a lengthy mission of tracking down an open store in search of much-needed personal hygiene supplies. Not only does Notaro have to navigate aisles of blue light specials, "artificially colored ham sandwiches," baby poop and lesion-ridden drug addicts, but she also manages to plop herself in line in front of

a murder of teenage boys, who refer to her as "Peppermint Fatty."

In "There's a Gun Somewhere Under the Tree," Notaro plants the reader in the middle of her first Christmas with her soon-to-be in-laws. Adorned in multi-colored hair, a leather jacket and cowboy boots, the author struggles to fit in, resulting in a man receiving a nursing bra and a 3-year-old tearing open his very own Leathermans tool.

Whether handing out urine samples or gracefully accepting half-used bath gel as a holiday gift, Notaro entertains and comforts any winter-weary soul. Each tale in *An Idiot Girl's Christmas* is short and sweet, perfect for quick reads in between making egg nog for 20 or wrapping your family's guns and knives. — Danica Stiles

