

Sci-fi short story collections offer intriguing portals

If you haven't been able to head out for a regular vacation this summer, you might try creating your own mini staycation with a stack of books. Similar to travel, reading can give you a break from routine and a chance to ponder different points of view.

Two new short story collections by Northwest authors offer interesting portals. Both are science fiction, tinged with supernatural elements.

The first author is undoubtedly familiar to you. I hope everyone has already had the pleasure of reading work by Molly Gloss. Gloss is a fourth generation Oregonian and a versatile and accomplished writer in many genres.

Gloss's newest book, "Unforeseen," offers a career retrospective of her short stories and stirs a couple of new tales into the mix.

Over her career, Gloss has developed a reputation for using the West as an imperative setting for her fiction. Here in the Northwest, readers will be mesmerized by Gloss's evocation of landscapes that are familiar, though often tweaked with dystopian elements, making stories such as "Downstream" and "Personal Silence" distinctly unsettling.

The first story, however, offers no regional landmarks. "Interlocking Pieces" is set in a hospital staffed with a disturbing assortment of robo-nurses, "organic" nurses and security personnel.

Despite "the first sour leaking of despair," the primary character attempts a forbidden encounter. To offer more detail here would be revealing too much – every reader deserves to experience the way Gloss carefully assembles the bits, eventually leading to a moment of tenuous grace.

The title story, on the other hand, withholds any such consolation. "Unforeseen" describes a seemingly pro forma meeting between insurance investigator and client, but "the small print" is spiked with tiny, eviscerating teeth.

Gloss creates each of her stories with such a light touch and with such deft strokes of detail that the revelations always come as a surprise.

This is the work of a master craftswoman.

I'd also like to introduce you to a debut story collection by Tacoma writer Katrinka Mannelly.

When Mannelly went to the library as a child, she was especially drawn to the books shelved, according to the Dewey Decimal System, in the 130 section. These were books about paranormal phenomena.

And now, all these years later, Mannelly's first book is called "Section 130."

The characters in these stories run the gamut. There are sirens and tooth fairies, a genie, a zombie, a lake monster and a demon. There's an apathetic faculty advisor – and a pet rock that cares too much.

Mannelly has fun throwing her supernatural characters together with run-of-the-mill mortals and then exploring how they get along. Havoc, humor and occasionally even empathy result.

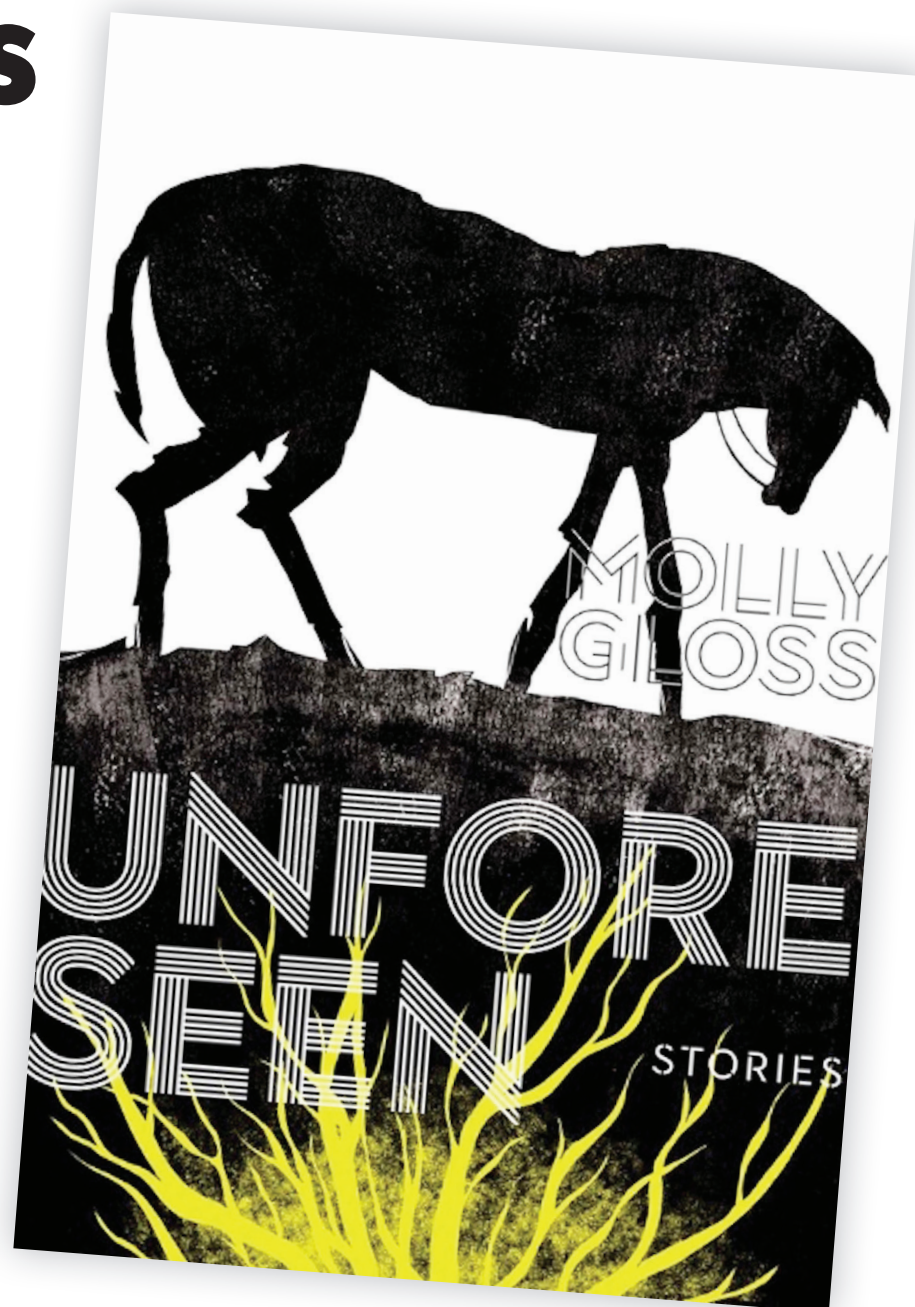
This Week's Book

"Unforeseen" By Molly Gloss

Saga Press – 350 pp – \$24.99

"Section 130" By Katrinka Mannelly

Zmok Books – 180 pp – \$16



These short stories are full of play and zip. Unfortunately, they are also studded with typos and other errors. "Your" and "you're" are frequently used indiscriminately for one another, and that's just one example of many. Was there no copyeditor available to catch these problems?

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlink.com