

**Gabriella Goliger**, *Girl Unwrapped*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010  
**Yasmin Ladha**, *Blue Sunflower Startle*, Freehand Books, 2010  
**Genni Gunn**, *Solitaria*, Signature Editions, 2010

These three novels explore the connection between family history and individual identity, and thus share territory with memoir. Indeed, Gabriella Goliger's *Girl Unwrapped* and Yasmin Ladha's *Blue Sunflower Startle*, both of which appear to have autobiographical elements, proclaim they are novels on their covers, as if to insist on their fictive nature. In doing so, they invite consideration of how the structures of fiction shape and give meaning to a life story.

Goliger's *Girl Unwrapped* is the story of Toni Goldblatt, the daughter of Holocaust survivors coming of age in 1960s Montreal. Toni's self-discovery is complicated by the fact that she is a lesbian, and thus her 'unwrapping' is bound to disappoint parents who seek the safe, conventional lives their wartime youths have denied them. Throughout the novel, Toni struggles to find a place for herself in a world where 'the divisions are plain and firm,' but she falls somewhere outside or between the categories. Even when she discovers Loulou's, a lesbian bar, in her university days, she doesn't fit. She's too young to belong with the older working-class women who identify as 'ladies [or] gentlemen,' but because she's butch and studies science, she's attacked by her feminist peers for being a 'repressed, fucked-up, bourgeois, imitation man who feels threatened by the revolution because it'll strip [her] of [her] privileges.'

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At times, the novel seems like a litany of humiliating incidents exemplifying Toni's failure to fit: the drunken public confession of her crush on Janet, the singing teacher at her Jewish youth camp; her later rejection by Janet when David, Janet's boyfriend, urges them to kiss; her awkward loss of virginity to an Arab boy in Jerusalem. The pain provoked by these humiliations can only seem an affront to parents who have lost everything, who have witnessed suffering on an epic scale. While her parents shelter Toni from their past, speaking of it only in fragments, her mother in particular also wields it as a punishing weapon. When moping Toni expresses the common teenage wish to be dead, her mother produces the story of a teenage aunt torn from her home, never to be found again. Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that Toni learns early to 'disappear...slipping out of her body, leaving a ghost of herself in her chair.'

I felt Toni succeeded in this all too well. She's something of a non-entity; the beautifully-drawn characters around her—her quiet father, rescuing books by 'persecuted, obscure, and has-been' German Jewish writers; her dissatisfied mother, Lisa; Janet, the hippie sing-

ing teacher; Juanita, her mentor in all things butch—are far more vivid and alive. In part this is an effect of the third-person, present-tense narration: it allows neither the sympathetic immediacy of the first-person voice nor the ironic, re-evaluating distance of past tense. It is also, perhaps, a deliberate thematic choice: Toni spends most of the novel denying or repressing her true self, and thus is bound to seem like an absence at its centre.

Toni would not seem so dull if the novel had focused less on her romantic life and more on other facets of her identity, such as her love of biology, which begins as a desire for order and a role (smart girl) that will give her a place in school, but blossoms into something more: ‘The bigness of the field drives her, the depths, and the mysterious intimacy too.... You go down, down, down to the basics—atoms jostle against each other, electrons skip out of their orbits, new bonds are formed, complexity grows.’ This Toni, engaged in something beyond herself, is interesting in turn. At novel’s end, she recognizes that her parents ‘truly come from another world, a starker one, the shadows of which no amount of modern light could ever dispel. But it is their world, not hers.’ She is both able to sympathize with them and set herself free from the need to live up to their history. I wanted to see more of her.

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Yasmin Ladha’s *Blue Sunflower Startle* structures its history by serving up generic conventions with a twist. The back cover describes it as a ‘Romance’ with the Canadian West as hero. While the unnamed narrator, whose family emigrates from Tanzania to Calgary as part of the Indian exodus from East Africa, repeatedly refers to the Prairies as her ‘under-the-rose’ love, ‘romance’ suggests a plot-driven novel with a particular ending: the happy-ever-after of the heroine and her hero. Any reader who brings those generic expectations to Ladha’s novel will be disappointed. A much better hint of what’s inside comes from the front cover, a collage of suitcases forming the blue sunflower of the title. The novel is constructed of fragmentary scenes and vivid images that form a meditation on what it is to love and belong to a place, and how that love shapes identity.

That’s not to say that nothing happens. *Blue Sunflower Startle* has all the makings of a Sweeping Immigrant Family Saga: her early childhood in Tanzania, with its increasingly difficult political situation; the family’s move to Calgary and the difficulty of fitting in to a new place; her 25-year, long-distance love affair with a Kashmiri man. Refreshingly, Ladha treats all this with a light hand, presenting it in a slim volume rather than a door-stopper packed with dramatic events. The novel seems to take as its motto the narrator’s claim

that 'Journeys bring out the inconsequential. Love is garnered in what is not ordinarily noticed.' The journey to Canada, for instance, is largely summed up in a vignette of the narrator boarding a plane with her 'neck and arms shining with gold' jewelry. Much struggle is left largely unstated here. The gold is a way of transporting wealth out of the country when the Tanzanian government has forbidden them to take much cash.

I found the first, Tanzania-set section of the novel most engaging, for it is dominated by the narrator's grandfather and his outsized, rule-breaking love for Allah and Tanzania. Grandfather 'sing[s] Sufi lyrics with cavernous passion. Merrily he submits to Allah, in the bathroom, or while nursing his double-peg of Chivas.' Even as more and more Indians leave Tanzania, he mixes with 'Hindus, Sikhs, Sunnis, the Goans, the local Gogos of Dodoma, the Warangis from near Kondoa, and the few Chaggas,' envisioning a melting-pot of a country to which all contribute. But his neighbours 'detest Grandfather making a messy omelette mixing everyone together,'; the newly decolonized country doesn't want him. This unrequited love for a place haunts the rest of the novel and shapes the narrator's life. It comes back, for instance, in the idea of 'chong,' which her Korean students define for her as a kind of unrequited, self-giving love. And perhaps remembrance of this past turns the narrator into someone who wants to be a lover, not a wife, and who won't settle down on her beloved Prairies: 'I am like a renter who relishes the privilege of walking away from loss and cross-eyed grief.' But she is no less passionate a lover for that, believing that 'one who re-departs never loves casually. She never wakes up things only on a Saturday night.' *Blue Sunflower Startle* may lack the forward drive of a typical romance plot, but its collage of repeated, reworked themes and images provides sharp insights into many kinds of love.

Genni Gunn's *Solitaria*, on the other hand, is largely shaped by the generic conventions of mystery. The novel begins with a television crew arriving at an Italian villa to report on the discovery of a body. From this point, the novel unfolds along parallel tracks: the gathering of the murder victim Vito Santoro's family in Italy, as they try to discover what has happened to him (their sister Piera had been claiming for years that he was sending letters from Argentina), and Piera's recounting of the family's history leading up to Vito's disappearance. This parallel structure—working back from the crime to discover what happened, and forward in recounting the progress of the investigation—is typical of mystery novels. Gunn deploys it for a different purpose, though; while we do find out what happened to

Vito, and the truth about David's parentage, her deft cutting between different points of view ultimately suggests that there is no single truth about the family's history.

Piera, who views herself as the family's matriarch, is long widowed and known to the townspeople as La Solitaria. She has become increasingly reclusive, shutting herself into her apartment in the house she shares with Teresa, Vito's wife, and refusing to speak to anyone but her Canadian nephew, David, whom she makes 'her reliquary,' the depository for her secrets. David is the natural choice for that role. Not only does he work as a translator, but he, too, is solitary—a never-married man in his mid-40s who is conducting a half-hearted long-distance love affair; the son of a distant single mother, a renowned soprano, who does not know who his father is. Piera describes herself to David as 'keeper of my family's past, both real and imagined,' and claims her stories are 'shaped from our collective memories.' Her family, though, contests her version, and David finds himself 'bewildered by the contrasting versions: everyone hostile towards Piera, interpreting her actions as destructive and self-serving, while Piera considers herself a matriarch, the daughter who saved the family' through a self-sacrificing marriage to a wealthy man. David becomes the family's translator or interpreter, carrying stories back and forth between Piera and her siblings, and in doing so becomes a kind of detective as well, questioning his relatives, comparing their various accounts, and trying to find the truth.

Increasingly, though, he realizes that the truth he is seeking is his own as much as Piera's. David begins the novel as a solitary man in whose online romances 'the screen is a buffer zone between real emotions,' but his experience in Italy creates in him a 'yearn[ing] for connection: to be bound to this country, his family, not rootless and grasping at the tendrils of their memory to link him to a nostalgic past.' He ends the novel both recognizing the emptiness of his passive life and holding hands with Piera, finally connected to someone. Only by delving into his family's past can he begin to imagine his own future.

—Elizabeth McCausland