

FICTION

Hooking Up

NARCISSUS ASCENDING

By Karen McKinnon
Picador. 214 pp. \$21

Reviewed by JENNY MCPHEE

I was in the waiting room of the Florence airport recently, eavesdropping on the cell-phone conversations of a young American woman. My flight was delayed, and although I had the International Herald Tribune and an issue of the New Yorker with me, I listened, riveted, to the entire conversation about the petty slings and arrows of my fellow traveler's not so outrageous fortune. One call lasted 45 minutes and was to a friend: "I'm just back from Spain and on my way to Prague. I've slept in my own bed only one night in the past three weeks. You'll never believe what has been going on with Lily, Pete, and Jamie . . ."

Reading Karen McKinnon's first novel, *Narcissus Ascending*, I was immediately transported back to that sinfully pleasurable voyeuristic space. McKinnon tells her story in the voice of Becky, a young collage artist whose parents died in a car crash when she was a child; she went to Berkeley, and is now living in Manhattan's East Village. Becky on her art: "I'm more subtle now. And I don't do car crashes. My new collages are nude self-portraits in Kodacolor." The prose has a chatty style with serendipitous punctuation, run-on sentences, short choppy sentences,

sentences that overlap and sentences that interrupt other sentences; the overall effect is not unlike overhearing a long, one-sided telephone conversation.

Becky has four friends: Max, Callie, Hugh and Dahlia. Becky introduces them—and their sexual dynamic—in one deft stroke: "Max is the actor Callie left Hugh for, the one Dahlia had an affair with while she was living with Callie. Max is a great guy but I've never gone for brooding and leather."

The tight circle of friends is obsessed with itself. But Callie—"who could always suck up the attention in a room, like she went around with a big invisible straw"—seems to have the corner on the obsession market, so much so that when the novel begins, she's on the outs with the other three. It's five days until Becky's first solo show in a So-ho gallery. Hugh's just in from California where he's "sold out" (of what, one might ask) to become a CPA; Dahlia, rich and beautiful, has come over to Becky's apartment to watch him sleep. Max will join them anon, and while having dinner ("We order takeout. From 3 different restaurants because of all the food allergies and aversions"), Callie's friends will decide they need revenge, for ex-

actly what is vague: slights, hurt feelings, minor betrayals, the stuff of 7th grade. Oddly, Callie's biggest and most frequently mentioned offense seems to be her penchant for masturbating, a habit that will have its consequences.

Exactly how Callie's friends will extract their revenge is unclear, even to them, but they decide to implement the retaliation plot by having Becky invite Callie to her opening:

"If she shows, she'll see me as I want her to, happy, mildly successful on my way to more, surrounded by my friends who love me and not her." Callie indeed shows, and high (11th grade) drama ensues: "I taste the tears of salt and make-up." So much for the plot.

But McKinnon doesn't particularly care about plot. She's much more interested in relationship dynamics, and keeps us, in spite of ourselves, glued to every little shift and nuance in the constellation of these five friends. As with gossip, potato chips or TV, however, while reading about these characters' "problems" you are mesmerized, compulsively eager for more, but when it's all over you kind of wish you hadn't indulged. Nevertheless, I had the nagging suspicion, or perhaps the hope, that there was

something more ambitious at work here. At times the prose is quite simply very funny, and the novel's intent seems to go beyond the earnest claims ("a wonderfully disturbing examination of friendship, identity, and self-absorption") on the dust jacket. No one mentions funny.

Giving the novel a large dollop of benefit of the doubt, whenever possible I read it as satire, a tongue-in-cheek send-up of the disaffected, over-privileged, solipsistic, apolitical, anti-intellectual, urban, twentysomething crowd. At times, I even believed McKinnon was treading (albeit lightly) in the footsteps of Rabelais, Swift, Voltaire and Huxley. Isn't that what the book's title suggests? Still, is *Narcissus Ascending* supposed to be funny or solemn? A humorous corrective of human vice and folly or flat melodrama? I wish I had more guidance. Unlike the woman in the Florence airport, McKinnon has asked her readers to listen in, and therefore she is under obligation to give us more clues as to how we are to interpret what we hear.

Back to the sex: "We fall on to his bed. I try to undress him. He stops me, turns off his cowboy nightlight, starts to undress me. Max I want to see you. Not yet . . . he begs. It's not his fault. His parents were nudists." That's funny, right? ■

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