



DAVID QUIMET

A Chevelle Comes to Paradise

WONDERFUL WOMEN BY THE SEA (New Press, \$25), a first novel by the Finnish short-story writer Monica Fagerholm, is itself wonderful. Written in an impressionistic style and subtly translated from the original Swedish by Joan Tate, the story follows the summer escapades of two families during the early 1960's. Made up of radiant vignettes that slip backward and forward in time, Ms. Fagerholm's narrative often feels like a series of snapshots in words, a linguistic photo album. Thomas, from whose perspective most of the novel is recounted, is a small child when he first goes with his parents, Isabella and Kayus, to the "white villa," a summer cottage on a beautiful bay. There he meets (and comes to worship) Renée, a head-

strong girl who lives nearby with her parents, Rosa and Gabriel. Renée's family has recently returned from America, bringing with them a Chevrolet Chevelle, complete with a bar in the trunk. Isabella, who has movie-star beauty and charm, befriends Rosa; they discuss Elizabeth Taylor's love life and paint their toenails white. They are among the first women on the beach to wear monokinis. With the passing of each summer, however, their little paradise is threatened by inevitable changes — particularly the growing restlessness of these "wonderful women by the sea." Although we are aware almost from the first page that Thomas's childhood world is doomed, this knowledge doesn't make its destruction any less painful.

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