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### Karen Smythe, *Stubborn Bones*

Vancouver: Polestar Book Publishers, 2001

Manuel Martinez

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## REFERENCES

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- 1 Smythe serves as a guide through the every-day life of extra-ordinary women, a landscape that she demonstrates an intimate knowledge of. For the most part, the stories are told in the first person by women who take the reader through their lives to let him see how they have been injured, to varying degrees, by their relationships with mothers, fathers and lovers, and how they have coped? Thus, in the title story that opens the book, the main character is coming to terms with her love for a former lover as she travels to and from a funeral. In "The Tooth Fairy and Other Inventions", the heroine deals with issues of abandonment. "In Dress Rehearsal", Leilah, exemplifies lack of confidence and insecurity, although she is an exceptionnally beautiful woman. "Feliz Navidad" portrays a woman who is trying to come to terms with the trauma of being abandoned by her first husband, and a recent and somehow surprising new marriage. In "Hugging Zero" Mary Beth struggles to sort out her life after the death of her alcoholic father. "Madeleine" is a story in five parts that introduces us to a woman who walks out on her husband and child in order to start a new life. The collection closes with "Strange Relations", a tripartite story which describes the relationships that span generations within a family.
- 2 Set against an everyday-life context, love is the major thematic thread that runs through Smythe's stories; love of self, love of others, sexual love, love between parent and child, love between siblings and love between friends; love leading to disappointment, sorrow, grief, fear, or betrayal. Love is thus explored through a feminine perspective and from the viewpoint of the emotional world of women.
- 3 Although the above subject-matter and view point have been visited by many writers and constitute an area where a writer can easily fall into the trap of resorting to well

worn phrases or structures, Smythe never allows her stories to descend into cliché. Her prose is direct without being simple. She gives her reader a glimpse of women's inner world, full of everyday details without it ever trivializing her subjects. She lays before the reader the quotidian details of "simple lives" that are nevertheless intricate and complex. She is a master in giving the trivial simplicity of every-day life the poetical complexity of inner drama.

- 4 To evoke her characters' inner struggles Smythe doesn't merely describe them; she rather uses episodes that mirror their inner turmoil. In "The Halfhearted Winner", for example, Carole, an antiques dealer begins to reconsider her decision to reconcile with Grant, her husband after he had an affair. Her stubbornness is therefore obliquely depicted through her mental attitude.

Only once had she erred, and suffered the winner's curse. Last spring, just after Grant had come clean, she bid far too much on a Victorian fire screen when one other woman would not give up the fight. Though it was not in very good condition, and though she did not have a client in the market for it, the screen was a rare find. (89)

- 5 The stories engage the reader, left in suspense as the stories are left open with simple, yet penetrating closing statements. At the end of the same story, for instance, Carole makes plans for restoring her Victorian fire screen so that "then she could put it on consignment before Grant came back home. He had never liked it much, she thought, and he probably wouldn't even notice or care that it was gone – though she couldn't be sure either way". (90)
- 6 In "Miss Forbes", to take another example, Karen Smythe draws a portrait of the title character, a middle-aged woman on the verge of menopause. Miss Forbes is never described; instead, the writer lets us get to know her gradually by letting a few phrases interspersed throughout the story do the job. Thus, we learn that she holds up cars as she drives "very slowly, towards Halifax". (22) We learn the secret about her father that she "had never told anyone to this day, not even" her boyfriend Ray. (23) Allie remembers getting sent to a Catholic boarding school, her lazy eye, her balding, but most of all about "this life she loved", and its "independence". The effect is cumulative and lends an added impact to the ending. Thus, held in a precarious balance, this life which she has built for herself is threatened by a marriage proposal by Ray.

Allie was crying now. She was falling apart, and she felt like she was losing more than just her hair. And yet Ray loved her. He said he even loved the way her eye rolled to the side when she looked at him, because it made him think she knew some secret about him that pleased her. He loved her, and because of that Allie didn't know if she could ever forget herself again. (34)

- 7 The stories in Smythe's collection share the same structure. The author lays the story before the reader principally through the words of the women themselves. The focus is maintained throughout as the plots quietly crescendo at the end with emotional impact that is rarely off the mark.
- 8 Karen Smythe is a gifted storyteller who not only paints her characters to life but lets us see their humanity in many dimensions. They are interesting characters that one is glad to have met. Their spirit is represented by the "bones" of the title. They are women who struggle to keep that spirit intact; characters with "stubborn bones" that refuse to dry, which explains the epigraph Smythe uses at the opening of her book: "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bone" – Proverbs 17:22 (9).

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