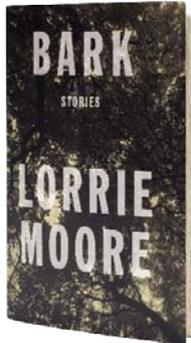


(FICTION)

# MIDLIFE MISADVENTURES

Short-fiction master **Lorrie Moore**'s new volume of stories registers a dark, quirky take on the new-millennial zeitgeist

By *Lisa Shea*



Eight sterling tales composed over the past decade—some of which have been published separately—comprise story virtuoso Lorrie Moore's latest collection, *Bark* (Knopf). Moore's unsparing insights, coupled with her laserlike wit, beam through in ways that surprise, shock, sadden, and cajole on every page.

Divorced moms and dads, diffident teenagers, friends who have departed or just been lost to time, would-be lovers, and long-married couples all come into pristine focus under Moore's emotionally astute lens. With her signature tough-love approach to her characters, she exposes their failings while leavening their dilemmas with resonating moments of humor, or pathos, or bliss.

In "Debarking," a single father's get-together with a divorced pediatrician includes watching her play-wrestle in the living room with her 16-year-old son after dinner. Perhaps, the dad thinks to himself, it's time to go.

In "The Juniper Tree," a woman is taken by two friends to the house of another friend

who supposedly has just died at the hospital. But that friend—is she dead or alive?—is home when they let themselves in, "dressed as she always dressed: in black jeans and a blue sweater. She simply, newly, had the imperial standoffishness I realized only then that I had always associated with the dead. We pulled up chairs and then each of us sat."

In "Thank You for Having Me," a single mother and her daughter, Nickie, attend the wedding of Nickie's former babysitter, a lively Brazilian woman marrying for the second time. Over the course of the afternoon, the mom's mind-set goes from reliving the terrible day when her husband abruptly left their marriage—telling her, "You can raise Nickie by yourself. You'll be good at it"—to taking to the dance floor with a man whose own brooding countenance instantly dissolves.

Moore's wacky, lovable, light-seeking characters move like skittish deer from the safety of the woods to open fields where dangers lurk but life's saving wonders also reside: a silly joke, a good book, a glass of wine, a favorite song, a shared meal, a sudden kiss. ●



Moore

(MEMOIR)

# AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

A prize-winning biographer trains his keen eye on the drama of growing up amid the deep dysfunction of his own family

By *Elyse Moody*



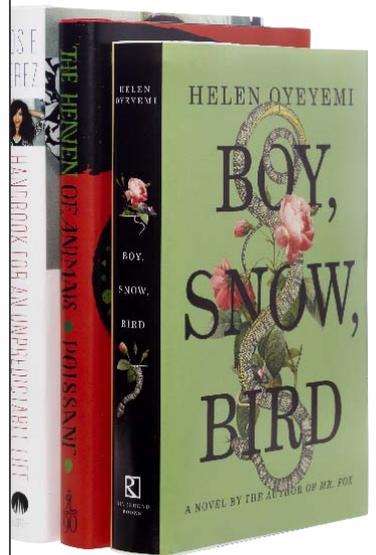
Blake Bailey's moving memoir, *The Splendid Things We Planned* (Norton), details his outwardly picture-perfect Oklahoma City upbringing: His father, Burck, was a dapper lawyer; his German-born mother, Marlies, a party-throwing intellectual; his elder brother, Scott, a popular but bullying—and increasingly troubled—would-be role model. Bailey, who has chronicled the fraught lives of writers John Cheever and Richard Yates, traces Scott's avalanching addiction to drugs and alcohol, which grows so noxious that the family speaks of him only occasionally, "while a kind of gas filled the room until we could barely breathe unless we changed the subject."

Scott's downward slide is an affliction with violent, erratic phases of remission and relapse, and it eventually metastasizes until it poisons them all.

Bailey demonstrates how forces that can't be curbed or explained can destroy those we love as well as our love for them. Sitting down with *Splendid Things* feels like knocking back drinks with him, sharing your best nutty-relative story, and having him spend six hours one-upping you. Remember the time we found Scott naked on the garage roof? How about when the cops caught him dangling merrily from a flagpole? It's all very entertaining—Bailey's knack for the odd detail, such as Scott's jaybirdlike way of bobbing on his toes, makes the book immensely enjoyable—but also profoundly, persuasively sad. Like Mary Karr or David Sedaris, Bailey doesn't try to manufacture an answer to the questions posed by his family's failings. Writing may have been catharsis enough. ●



Bailey



(BOOKS)

## TRUST US

**DOING THE RIGHT THING**

In her smart, tough as nails, funny as hell memoir, *Handbook for an Unpredictable Life* (Crown), Brooklyn-born actress **Rosie Perez** writes, "I was never a 'street' kid, but I was part of the post-Vietnam generation who grew up with the residue of inflation, parents' broken dreams, poverty, and heroin-cluttered streets... (and) who had something new and more innovative to offer than the prejudiced world around us predicted."

**SOUTHERN STARS AND BARS**

Florida-based writer **David James Poissant**'s debut story collection, *The Heaven of Animals* (Simon & Schuster), targets the tough and tender dynamics that make and break families. For the mismatched brothers in "Nudists," "silence stood between them like the quiet that follows the click of a pin pulled from a grenade."

**LIVING ON THE COLOR LINE**

*Boy, Snow, Bird* (Riverhead), from British novelist **Helen Oyeyemi**, exquisitely recasts the classic wicked-stepmother story by deftly baring the secrets, soul-searching, and complex racial issues of a light-skinned black family in 1950s New England who have always passed for white.—*L.S.*

Moore: Zane Williams; Bailey: © Mary Brinkmeyer; still lifes, clockwise from top left: Philip Friedman/Studio D (2); Richard Majchczak/Studio D