

MOTOR CITY

Tina McElroy Ansa

Shifting Through Neutral

By Bridgett M. Davis
Amistad, \$23.95

THERE IS SOMETHING EMPOWERING about driving. The experience of sitting behind the wheel of a sturdy car—an Oldsmobile from the '60s perhaps, the rules of the road in your head, the steering wheel gripped in your hands, the hum of the motor in your ear—imparts a sense of being invulnerable.

Perhaps this imagery is what draws Rae, the quintessential daddy's girl at the center of this coming-of-age novel set in 1970s Detroit. She is anything but stable, empowered or invulnerable. Seven-year-old Rae is not sure where she stands in her decidedly off-kilter household. Is she her sister Kimmie's responsibility? Is she her mother's burden? Is she her father's savior?

Shifting Through Neutral is a novel of loss and fragility, of searching for place, home, stability, of standing on the brink of discovery afraid to turn loose of innocence. It is Rae's story, a child's tale. However, it is also the story of mothers and fathers and half-sisters and your daddy's women and your mama's men and aunts from down South who stand in the gap when tenuous bonds stretch and snap.

Rae spends her youthful days navigating the shaky terrain of a splintered household and her childhood nights sleeping atop her father's broad back in the downstairs den. Her mother, smoking Kool cigarettes, listening to LPs of Stevie Wonder and playing solitaire in the king-sized bed upstairs, thinks the sleeping arrangement is to prevent him from leaving them again.



Rae knows different. It is just to be near him, "unshaven face, snoring breath, end-of-the-day genitalia"—a reference that insinuates intimacy rather than sexuality.

The novel alternates chapters between Rae's childhood in the house her mother's inheritance bought and her father's last days dying in a V.A. hospital room of too-high blood pressure, a stroke and incapacitating headaches nearly a decade later. The alternating chapters and the shifting times are but two of the many "shifts" in the narrative.

Some of the them work. Others do not. The swings through time from one chapter to another leave the reader baffled and having to turn back to previous chapters to regain the story line. The subtle shifts within the plot, however, can serve for rich and sometimes surprising material. The shift between the summer riots raging outside the family home and the chaos that is occurring within is handled with delicacy and grace.

From time to time, Davis does stray into mundane language. Rae's senses are "assaulted by the smell of alcohol"

in her Daddy's hospital room. Yet on the very next page, the author redeems herself when Rae takes "a deep breath, and it hurt, as though a tiny straight pin was lodged in my chest."

In the end, the novel is a bit too long, becoming somewhat unwieldy in the writer's hands, like an extended road excursion with too many side trips. Davis, however, does keep the "riders" entertained along the way with her lovely writing. Rae's sister is as elusive as "a beloved glittery goldfish" in a little girl's hands. The father's snores are his baby girl's "lullaby." It is the writing with its '70s slang and timeless imagery that makes *Shifting Through Neutral* well worth the ride.

FLESH & BLOOD

Sarah Gonzales

A Seahorse Year

By Stacey D'Erasmo
Houghton Mifflin, \$24

THE CHARACTERS IN STACEY D'Erasmo's second novel are imperfect. The most obviously flawed is 17-year-old Christopher, the heart and soul of



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{ BOOK REVIEWS }

A Seahorse Year, who is diagnosed with schizophrenia. Christopher was the result of a brief sexual encounter between Nan Ashby, a gay woman, and Hal Cooper, a gay man. Nan and Hal lead separate lives in San Francisco although they remain close friends and share parenting responsibilities.

Nan's longtime lover Marina, an artist, has kept three dried seahorses in her studio ever since Christopher gave them to her on a beach excursion seven years before. The fragility of their papery bodies suggests the novel's three main characters, Marina, Nan and Christopher, and their tenuous relationship to each other.

Although Nan is described as "sturdy" and proves to be brave when she tracks down Christopher after he runs away, she is anything but rock solid. Nan suspects that Marina is seeing "a stupid girl" outside of their relationship and she constantly worries about her son's future. As a friend and lover Nan is prickly, an island dweller in a sea of humanity; the rare moments when Nan is sympathetic and likable are when we see her in her role as mother. She continually saves her son's life throughout the novel, even while her own falls apart.

Marina is a more interesting and observant character. Marina loves Nan but cannot determine her role in Christopher's and Nan's lives, especially after the dramatic diagnosis—Is she a mother, too? An aunt figure? A disposable lover? These questions lie at the root of her disloyalty. Because she cannot define her role, she philanders, indeed seeing a "stupid girl" who may or may not have the answers Marina seeks about sex, art and life.

Christopher struggles with his illness, his newly unreliable mind and his all-consuming love for a woman who in his psychosis is a mélange of rock

star P.J. Harvey and his real girlfriend, Tamara. When he runs away he is seeking an imagined place where his mind will be at peace.

The narrative leaps from one character to the next. For a few sentences we are in Hal's mind as he wonders if a particular lithe and precious man could ever love him. Next we jump to Nan's brain; she's angry and smoking cigarettes and yanking weeds in her garden.

Into Christopher's head where he believes that his feet are speaking to him. To Marina, feeding Christopher's plum-eating shark while she observes, "every species has its oddballs." And Tamara wants to know "if *really* is the end of

the story," as if knowing what is *really* the matter or how she *really* feels will reconcile all uncertainty.

These distinct voices form a story collage depicting an unconventional family under pressure. The fault in this novel is this: It's so mundanely human at times that it becomes a bit tedious. Nan sits at her desk at work listening to a paper bag rustle outside; Marina eats yogurt and reads the paper; Hal picks up the phone and puts it down. While these ordinary activities dilute the stress and anxiety the characters are feeling, the novel doesn't quite strike a perfect balance between tedium and crisis. The first third of the novel drags as it gets up to speed, but once it does the multifaceted narrative sparkles with both dry humor and unadorned tragedy.

Perhaps the closest any character comes to perfection is Nan in her love for Christopher. It is pure and instinctual and she will go to great lengths to protect him. A minor character in the novel comments, "Love is a story we tell ourselves about the future," and so Nan's love for her son emboldens her and provides her with reason to hope for the best—perfect ending or not. **Ms.**

