

## GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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## BOOKS

## Cardboard characters make novel long, tedious

One Better  
By Rosalyn McMillan  
(Warner, \$22, 360 pp.)



VICTORIA DIAZ

Middle-aged widow Spice Witherspoon owns a gourmet delicatessen called Southern Spice. It's a glorious, four-star restaurant in downtown Rochester, Mich., a five-story, reconverted Victorian mansion where the elite meet to eat "country cures" from Virginia, (and) bacon with the rind on, "not to mention Sereno's carver or "egg-white citrus omelets with a tropical citrus butter sauce."

Spice lives above the store in a sumptuous, two-story duplex affair, appointed with Ming vases, ivory linen and Fabergé silver-to-die-for. Through hard work, she's not only made herself rich but highly respected in her community. To say that this is important to her is putting it mildly.

She's about as beautiful as her two beautiful daughters, Mink and Sterling. Granddaughter Azure is as cute as a button. Business is booming. Though there's no real romance in her life, that seems to be fine for the moment, as far as Spice is concerned.

So what's her problem? It's a long story. Maybe it's too long. Though Detroit author McMillan would seem to have a real flair for stirring up readers' tastebuds, and though she appears to want to say something important here about truth

and love, her characters never take on much more dimension than paper dolls. Consequently, many readers may find that this book loses its punch early in the game.

Essentially, Spice's problems center around on a dark past and her two adult daughters. Sterling is a 28-year-old, heroin-addicted ne'er-do-well. Always obsessed with her personal appearance and supported by her indulgent mother, she's also obsessed with fellow ne'er-do-well and drug dealer Bonnie.

Older sister Mink, on the other hand, is an over-achiever. Not only one of the first black females to pilot a commercial airliner, she's recently been promoted to captain. With loving husband Dwight and cute daughter Azure, she resides in one of the splendid old mansions of the Boston-Edison District.

She also drives a sparkling new Jag and owns her own 310 twin-engine Cessna, made possible by her \$270,000 annual salary. (Hard-working Dwight holds down two jobs: firefighting and landscaping.) Still, Mink needs more. As she struggles to get it, however, she begins to lose what she already has. A brief affair with a handsome-but-shallow copilot crash lands. And her troubles have only just begun.

In the meantime, Otis Witherspoon, brother of Spice's deceased husband, and Golden Westbrook, beloved pastor at Detroit's Divinity Baptist Church, vie for the lovely, but highly independent Spice's attention. "I enjoy my freedom... I don't need a husband any more," she declares at some point — and somehow a reader

gets the feeling this should be filed under Famous Last Words. Also, in the meantime, Spice's life, which is short and long-time friend, Carmen, has developed some life-threatening drinking problems, due to her own dark past, which is inextricably linked with Spice's.

In addition to its cardboard characters, McMillan's novel is hampered by an omniscient, flowery "voice" that interjects a kind of ill-fitting, intrusive commentary from time to time. ("Death is the foreshadowing of life; we die that we may die no more." or "Memories are like more." or "Memories are like more." books that remain a long time shut and need to be opened from time to time to exhume the dust that's collected.") Also, a conclusion that's very hard to swallow — especially in its melodramatic timing — does little to enhance this book.

McMillan's imagination seems liveliest when it comes to painting word-pictures of things instead of people. Living spaces, restaurants, clothing, food, the background tapestry of Detroit in general — all of these add more spark and sparkle here than do leading players. The author paints a surprisingly engaging (though not always flattering) portrait of the thriving metropolis of Novi, by the way, with its linen shops and bookstores side by side with truck stops, automatic laundries and the ubiquitous Red Lobster Inn

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia freelance writer who specializes in book and theater reviews. You can reach her by voice mail at 953-2045, then press 1854.

## Author takes a hard look at life

What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day  
By Pearl Cleage  
Avon Books, 1997, \$20



ESTHER LITTMANN

What does a woman do when she discovers she's HIV positive? Declare her innocence on the TV talk-show circuit? Write a book about her underserved misfortune? Not Ava Johnson, protagonist of Pearl Cleage's first novel, "What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day." Perpetually honest to pretense, she holds herself accountable and alerts her former lovers to the problem. Once owner of a fashionable beauty shop and good-time companion to the rich and powerful, Ava pulls in her wings and heads toward home. She plans to cocoon with big sister Joyce and then move on to San Francisco, the AIDS tolerant capital of the United States.

Home is Idlewild, Mich., a small town that was once a summer haven for middle-class black families. At one time, they "exuded the confidence of people who know the house note will be mailed on time and the car payments are always up-to-date." But now Idlewild, like many of its rural counterparts, has caught the urban disease: drugs, broken homes, child abuse, and crime.

For every action there's a reaction, and in this town it goes by the name of Joyce. When Ava arrives, she finds her widowed sister raising consciousness and compassion with survival lessons for the unwed mothers of her newly formed "Sewing Circus." Teaching birth control, nutrition, and self-defense, her ultimate goal is to help mend the torn fabric of black society. Ava, meanwhile, is occupied elsewhere — writing a book about her underserved misfortune. Not Ava Johnson, protagonist of Pearl Cleage's first novel, "What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day." Perpetually honest to pretense, she holds herself accountable and alerts her former lovers to the problem. Once owner of a fashionable beauty shop and good-time companion to the rich and powerful, Ava pulls in her wings and heads toward home. She plans to cocoon with big sister Joyce and then move on to San Francisco, the AIDS tolerant capital of the United States.

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to the candence and diction of inner-city lingo, violent youths consumed by self-hatred and women abandoned or dependent on abusive men.

"I thought there was a limit we would reach," writes Cleage in the persona of her protagonist. "A cutoff. A damn bottom line. We used to brag about it. There were certain crimes we considered ourselves incapable of committing. When we read in the paper that someone had stabbed their mother to death or raped a 2-year-old, we would shake our heads and cluck our tongues and turn the page because we knew it wasn't one of us."

"No anymore. We do it all, mostly to each other, and when we get caught and the six-o'clock news shows us in our bright orange prison coveralls with our hands cuffed behind us and lint in our hair, we don't look away. We don't even look scared. What we look is bored."

Avoiding the simplistic just-say-no solutions and self-righteous claims of victimization, Cleage's novel — beneath a solid surface of entertainment value — is a call for responsibility, compassion, and desperately needed mutual support.

Pearl Cleage appeared for a signing of "What Looks Like Crazy" at Borders Book Store.

Esther Littmann is a resident of Bloomfield Township. She is a private tutor with Una Duwornik and Associates. You can leave her a message from a touch-tone phone at (313) 953-2047, mailbox number 1893.

## BOOK HAPPENINGS

Book Happenings features various happenings at suburban bookstores. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7279.

**BARNES & NOBLE (NORTHVILLE)**  
Mystery book lovers, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 28: Fiction Book Club discusses "Smilla's Sense of Snow," 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29: Linda Coe discusses "A New Year, A New Beginning," 4 p.m. Saturday Jan. 31 at the store

**BARNES & NOBLE (BLOOMFIELD HILLS)**  
Mystery book lovers, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 28: Fiction Book Club discusses "Smilla's Sense of Snow," 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29: Linda Coe discusses "A New Year, A New Beginning," 4 p.m. Saturday Jan. 31 at the store

**BORDERS (ROCHESTER HILLS)**  
Super bowl Soup, 1-4 p.m., Sunday, Jan. 25; David Kraus gives travel tips, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 27; singer/songwriter Dan Hazlett 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 30; Leader Dog presents program on how they train dogs, 11 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 31 at the store 1122 Rochester Road, Rochester Hills (248) 652-0558.

**BORDERS (FARMINGTON HILLS)**  
Nancy O'Hara signs her book "Just Listen: A Guide to Finding Your True Voice," 7 p.m. at the store 30995 Orchard Lake Road, (248) 737-0110.

**BORDERS (BIRMINGHAM)**  
Robert Burns Birthday celebration 1 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 25; Mask Puppet Theater, 3 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 25; Jamie Harrison signs her

book "An Unfortunate Prairie Occurrence," 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 27; Emmy-winning documentary maker Gary Glezer discusses downtown's resurgence 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 28; Jeffrey Capronio discusses "The Crisis Counselor," 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29; Dennis Cyporin Trio, 7:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 30; meet Angelina Ballerina, 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 31 at the store 34300 Woodward, Birmingham, MI 48009, (248) 203-0005.

**TRUTH BOOKSTORE**  
Dr. Jawanta Kunjufu will discuss his book "Black College Student Survival Guide," a book on black students can succeed in attaining a college degree, 4 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 31, at the bookstore, Northland Mall, Southfield (248) 557-4824