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Ann Arbor writer tells stories of estrangement

BENDING HEAVEN
by Jessica Francis Kane (Counterpoint, \$23.00)

BY VICKI DIAZ
CORRESPONDENT

Don't expect any of these eleven, quiet short stories to uplift you in any particular or conventional sense. Don't expect to warm to the characters, who often seem edgy as razors, distant, nearly robotic. Don't expect to be whisked away to colorful places, or to experience grand and glorious adventure.

What you can expect in this new collection written by Ann Arbor native Jessica Francis Kane are minutely observed, eloquently expressed scenes of contemporary life, along with characters who, though often drawn in subtle shades of gray, will persist in haunting you after you've closed the pages of this book.

Estrangement is the theme in every story — estrangement from one's family, from one's spouse, from one's surroundings, from one's work, even from one's self.

And most of the stories center around women, as they struggle to gain a kind of foothold, or fight against a feeling of helplessness.

Evidence of Old Repairs, set in London and Ann Arbor, tells the story of Sarah, a sensitive woman who can't really go back to square one after she discovers the past affair of her husband, Paul.

Her mother was an alcoholic and her grandmother was an alcoholic, and Sarah tends to drown her own sorrow in drinking.

The story is saturated with liquid images — rain, mist, fountains, lakes, tears, drinks, drizzle — that subtly enhance Kane's painterly words. Its opening scene of a London

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park is a "landscape (that) looked as though it had been drawn overnight in wet ink." A said the drunken Sarah creates turns into "a soggy confetti." A wet Ann Arbor Spring morphs the daffodil garden "to mud, which splattered up onto the white wall of the garage, and onto the long green daffodil leaves, and finally onto the... flowers."

In *How to Become a Publicist*, we meet a nameless young woman from a Midwestern town, endeavoring to gain a foothold in the New York literary world. As her loving father repaints her old room back home (and her mother suffers a highly serious case of empty nest syndrome), she tries mightily to land a position as an editorial assistant in the *Big Apple*, ending up, instead, as a neophyte publicist.

Surrounded by what feels like a kind of energetic borderline-insanity or nonsense in this world of pitch and sell where everything must have a "label," she begins to feel severed from reality. Gradually, that banal, blue-and-white room back home takes on a kind of perverse attraction, turning into a symbol of failure at the same time that it offers a haven.

Refuge takes us to a corporate retreat called Potomac

Run, just outside Washington. (Potomac Run is "surrounded by a golf course, a man-made lake and...the remains of the forest subdued into geometrical shapes, a triangle, a parallelogram.") Here, we follow along as a middle-aged Shelley Dixon, an associate with a prestigious law firm, wrestles with the "loss" of her son (who has gone to live with his father), the failure of her marriage, and her growing alienation from herself and her surroundings.

The *Arnold Proof*, the sole story that does not feature a female character as its leading player shows us the heart and mind of an aging and brilliant mathematics professor who is perhaps losing his wife and his ability to think and reason.

Exposure is another story of loss and aging. In it, a noted writer, whose husband has left her for a beautiful woman, deeply fears a "photo shoot" to promote her new book.

First Sale is a sensitively told tale — one of the strongest in this collection — of a woman and her young son, as they prepare for a yard sale, in which they will sell off items of their old life (this marriage, too, has failed), and try to begin anew.

Vicki Diaz is a Livonia resident who reviews books and movies for the Observer & Eccentric newspapers.

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