

tainly sense the gravity, the hypnotic force of this careening ride, this ever-in-flux parlor game. As the book moves toward its end, darkness and menace seep in. One subtitle, "Exquisite Corpse," hints at the surrealist's game and even points to a more pronounced tragedy: "She was and was now/no more of her. She was as exquisite as ever/the diggers did see." More and more dreams of death and dreams of looking at death arise and insinuate themselves: "I dreamed, she said, my death" and "O little closure/we have looked for you/ever/where. . . ." Hearing echoes of Keats and Coleridge and others, we're lulled into and toward some kind of closure. "Here, it said, fall here./Into love's sweet looking glass."

DeWitt Henry, *The Marriage of Anna Maye Potts*, University of Tennessee Press

Reviewed by Jack Smith

DeWitt Henry is perhaps best known as the founder and builder of one of the most prestigious literary magazines in the country — *Ploughshares*. But he has several anthologies to his credit (most recently, *Sorrow's Company: Writers on Loss and Grief*) as well as an impressive body of short fiction. *The Marriage of Anna Maye Potts* is his first book of fiction, a debut that well deserves the recognition it received as winner of the Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel.

With the very fullness of life, this novel explores the hopes and desires, the tensions and tenuous resolutions, of characters from working class backgrounds, struggling for some measure of joy, some handle on personal meaning. To Henry's credit, such personal struggles are easily — and readily — identifiable. They come out of the social geography the characters move in, breathe in, and in which they attempt to transform their lives. The pacing of *Marriage* is often frenetic, jarring, mirroring the desperation of Henry's characters, but as things begin to come together for the central character, Anna Maye Potts, the reader feels the wellsprings of hope surfacing in the interstices of the prose, so that finally it's an upbeat novel; still, old complications persist and foreshadow new permutations.

The story of Anna Maye Potts is the transformation of a woman who has led a relatively isolated existence — no man in her life and no social life — just her work: a supervisory position in the packaging department of John P. Manville Co., Confectioners. With a fine eye for detail, Henry portrays Anna Maye's absolute devotion to this company, her meticulous attention to routine, to scheduling, to personnel. For her, nineteen years of faithful service to this small candy company brings a sense of belonging that matters more than money. What held Anna Maye back early on from the flowering of a romantic relationship was being responsible for taking care of her father in his deteriorating condition, never leaving home. Her

sister, Mary, on the other hand, did leave home, got married, moved back into the house, and had children. The two sisters view each other jealously, each one believing the other was the favored child, the focus of their father's attention.

In her present circumstances, Anna Maye is clearly on the outs. Mary and her husband, Howard, control the routines, the moods, the tempo of the house. Daily life is at a high pitch, utterly frantic — with some of the novel's finest scenes depicting Mary as a basket case over her young children with their persistent needs, problems, spills, messes. Anna Maye, like an old-style spinster, is relegated to a second-floor bedroom. Not a child, not exactly an autonomous adult, she must be sure she does not in any way intrude on the family who has dominant claims — in sheer numbers alone — on the house. And yet Anna Maye's mere presence is enough to rock the boat because Mary wants to clear Anna Maye out of the house altogether, to make room for her growing family — and to ready the house for sale. Mary has designs on moving up the social scale, becoming a fashionable suburbanite, enjoying new wealth and prestige. An electrical power failure that casts the house into utter darkness becomes a rich symbol for Anna Maye's own private hell: snuffed out, prospects diminishing.

When Anna Maye suddenly decides to move into the ywca, Mary views this decision as morbid, self-pitying — evidence of venom directed at her and her husband. The power failure at the house is soon followed by Anna Maye's temporary blindness at the Y — ingenious symbolism on Henry's part, as Anna Maye must now look within to tap her own sources of power, to gain new light, new vision. With her eyesight back, and with the help of Howard and Louise Miscello, an acquaintance at work, Anna Maye soon leaves the Y and finds a house — her first claim on the world.

She has only one man to compare to Louie: a recent blind date (foisted off on her by a coworker), who turned out to be vulgar and self-centered. Louie, whose wife has been dying of cancer, has for some time relied on her for companionship and for sympathy, and she has found in him a friend, a person she enjoys: When Louie's wife dies, the time is ripe, and Anna Maye finally marries — making her second claim on the world. With a camera eye for the gritty, the unsettling, DeWitt Henry presents a marriage night made in hell, not one Anna Maye could have imagined — truly a classic rug pulling, with Louie treating her like a piece of meat and getting rollickingly drunk on their night out in Atlantic City. Yet marriage itself, Anna Maye believes, is still an opportunity to claim her "right" to love and to the kind of household she values, the kind of home she imagines — which soon includes a garden. Her husband simply will have to submit, to respect her vision, be a helper.

The acquisition of Manville's by a streamlined, efficient candy manufacturer leads to the firing of Anna Maye, but she has other goals at this time in her life. The symbolism of her flowering and burgeoning contrasts provocatively with Mary's jealousy and scorn as she witnesses her sister's

new independence and force of character. One strength of this novel is clearly Henry's insight into the incessant push and pull of human relationships.

In *The Marriage of Anna Maye Potts*, DeWitt Henry masterfully portrays a woman gaining an inner force which she refuses to compromise. The novel evokes in the reader a sense for the power of the heart and the will to transform one's self – and to make claims on what's rightfully one's own.