

BOOK REVIEW

Dahlia Season: Stories and a Novella

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Dahlia Season: Stories and a Novella. By Myriam Gurba. San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2007. Pp. 190. \$14.95 (paper).

If you have ever wondered how to make lemonada from the tragedies of your life, Myriam Gurba's *Dahlia Season* is for you. In her collection of four short stories and an eponymous novella, Gurba reveals a vulnerable and beautiful reality known to queers who inhabit society's borderlands. Each narrative portrays a defining event in the lives of the Chicana main characters: a transgender man, a young father-to-be-turned-abortionist, a lesbian cutter, a butch lesbian gang member, and a lesbian with Tourette syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

With first-person narration to intensify every story and draw readers into the main characters' lives, each of the coming-of-age stories focuses on a dark event as a moment of revelation, using tragedy as the context for individual triumph and self-understanding. The transgender coming-out story "Cruising" sifts through Long Beach's history as a beach used by societal "outsiders." Through dichotomies of past and present, day and night, rich and poor, gay and straight, male and female, the narrator makes clear the inherent dangers of queer existence and subsistence. The portrayal of the beach's dark history as a site of sex and violence creates context for a first-person account of passing as male.

Awkward teenage sexual exploration and self-destructive tendencies take center stage in the short stories "Just Drift" and "White Girl." In "Just

Drift,” Roberto Cassidy Moran shares a normal day in the life of a Chicano high school student who tries to play dumb while facing a harsh reality. The difficulty of drifting through life is portrayed in the contrast between Cassidy’s “kick-back” attitude and the tremendous amount of concentrated energy he spends thinking about how to maintain the balance between being “cool” and “smart.” The short story “White Girl” recounts a Chicana’s first sexual cutting experience with a white girl. The story skillfully focuses attention on white girls as a strange and exotic Other, which shifts negative attention away from the sexualized self-mutilation allowing an inversion of the “normal” deviant paradigm. Both stories direct readers’ attention to the inchoate realization of sexual possibilities and create a positive understanding of difficult transitions.

The stark reality of queer youth is rendered wondrous throughout the collection. “Primera Comunción” explores the importance of building queer family for those who are rejected by their family. Although conditionally accepted by her biological family and gang, Angel Malo’s butch identity separates her from both. The Chicana butch street gang member finds love and acceptance after helping another Chicana flee a murder. Finally, love allows Angel to experience full acceptance and communion, giving her a moment of personal freedom. As with the other stories, the story’s striking authenticity facilitates the use of love as a powerful antidote to life’s tragedies.

At the close of Gurba’s work, she treats the reader to a novella, “Dahlia Season,” where the main character, Desiree Garcia, endures teenage angst complicated by undiagnosed anxiety disorders. Her humorous, apparently mean-spirited, and typical teenage antisocial behavior masks Desiree’s obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and Tourette syndrome. The novella’s

witty descriptive language illustrates Desiree's struggle to maintain her self-esteem as she learns to manage her mental disorders. At the same time, she finds herself unconsciously drawn to others whose bodies betray them, like Nito, her Mexican cousin with a deformed leg and her girlfriend Rae who is "really a guy trapped in a gold mine of a stripper's body" (167). Through her personal relationships, Desiree sees past the hubris of her youth when she tried to handle her disorders alone, learning to use humor and friendship to navigate life's multiple challenges.

Dahlia Season expands the field of Chicana scholarship through a depiction of 1980s middle-class, first-generation Mexican American youth culture. The text exemplifies Gurba's gift for illuminating the vulnerability of those who are queer, that is, of those who do not fit narrowly defined societal categories. Using extraordinary skill and sharp wit, Gurba creates three-dimensional characters whose various identities intersect and reveal the complexity of race, class, gender, and sexuality. However, Chicana nerds of color are at the heart of Myriam Gurba's collection. Similar to the writing of Felicia Luna Lemus, Gurba focuses on Chicana characters' ability to develop by using their difference as a source of strength and knowledge.

With an honest portrayal of the healing potential of Chicana cultural mestizaje, the work embodies ideas described in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Scholars exploring intersectionality and the intricate borderland spaces inhabited by those whom society labels as outcasts should read *Dahlia Season*. Those already familiar with *Dahlia Season* should listen to actress Marisol Ramírez's passionate and authentic reading of the collection. As one of the few Chicana books on Audible.com, the audio version shares the select company of Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo

Anaya, Ana Castillo, and Benjamin Alire Sáenz. The audio version expands the accessibility of Gurba's work and provides an important opportunity for teachers to support reading, especially by student readers. In whatever its media form, Myriam Gurba's *Dahlia Season* professes a profound love for queer familia living in the borderlands.

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