



Chicks and balances

A debut author upends chick lit with an unflinching look at poverty.

By **Gretchen Kalwinski**

If there existed a polar opposite to chick lit, Corrina Wycoff's *O Street* (O.V. Books, \$17.95) would exemplify the genre. The debut author isn't interested in romanticizing love, motherhood, hardship—or anything at all, come to think of it.

O Street collects ten short stories about Beth Dinard, who spends her Newark childhood caring for her mentally ill, homeless, junkie single mother. "Visiting Mrs. Ferullo" shows Beth following a neighbor home, longing for the home-cooking aromas that waft from the woman's apartment. In "The Wrong Place in the World," adult Beth is in Chicago trying to stabilize her life even while her brutal memories affect her relationships and attitudes about class and work. When she gets a phone call informing her of her mother's death, it triggers a relapse into old, destructive patterns. It's tempting to read the tightly linked stories as a novel, but Wycoff stresses the importance of the form.

"In a linked-story format, I can present other points of view as short pieces of contrast," she says. "I wanted to structure the book so that it begins and ends with a death, because I wanted it to read as a cycle. Linearity, to me, seems more of a construct than cycles." A single mother herself, Wycoff

says the stories should not be confused with autobiography.

"They are based on a political truth: Single mothers fall through the cracks in this country, and the cracks grow in proportion to these women's economic challenges, making inaccessible the so-called American Dream," she says. "When my son was born, I'd not yet gone to college, and money was extremely tight. I drew on that experience... but by the time I wrote about it, [I] had changed enough that it didn't resemble my 'real' life at all."

"Single mothers fall through the cracks in this country."

In one scene, a depressed Beth wishes that she could "grow into someone new—someone who could easily have had two parents, good breeding, hearty suppers and piano lessons." Passages like these strike unexpected chords. Though many contemporary narratives deal with women's physical and spiritual transformations, few do so at the poverty level. This is, of course, no grand coincidence: Poor women face even more barriers than their male counterparts in getting their stories told.

"The second of these I wrote when my son was two years old," says Wycoff. "I wrote it, in part, in reaction to all of the sentimental, dreamy writing about motherhood."

In Chicago, Wycoff met UIC's Cris Mazza, an award-winning author who has waged a one-woman war against the chick-lit genre. Since then, Mazza has become both her creative muse and mentor.

"Twelve years ago, I read *How to Leave a Country*, and decided I needed to read everything she'd ever written," Wycoff says. "She was the reason I chose to go to college and, later, graduate school at UIC, and she helped me see that the disparate single-mother stories I'd written could be linked."

Because of the book's gravitas (the title story is especially harrowing), getting *O Street* published wasn't easy.

"I got about seven rejections over the course of four years, all from small presses," she says, "many of whom called the collection 'too dark.'"

Indeed, Wycoff portrays the gritty, sorrowful elements of her characters' lives head-on and offers no easy solutions—no one's riding up on a white horse, but neither are the stories bleak. Instead, drama and tension are delivered in such a subtle but detail-infused way that the reader becomes invested in Beth's plight early on in the collection. The collection will likely elicit Dorothy Allison comparisons for its depictions of poor women and lesbian relationships.

Wycoff is working on a novel now, and is planning another about teaching at a community college.

With chick lit down, it looks like the vaunted "university novel" may next.

Wycoff reads this week. See listings.

Reviews

Christine Falls

★★★★★

By **Benjamin Black**, Henry Holt, \$25.

First things first: Benjamin Black is a pseudonym of 2005 Booker winner John Banville. *Christine Falls* is the first in a planned series of thrillers by Banville, starring Irish coroner Quirke, a lonely, drunken, mammoth of a man who seeks redemption through his sleuthing.

The book begins with two story lines that eventually converge: A nurse transports a baby from Ireland to America under suspicious circumstances, and Quirke finds his brother-in-law Mal—a doctor at the same hospital—in his office, falsifying a young woman's death record. From there, an intricate plot involving family betrayals, international black-market babies and Catholic complacency emerges. The plot is well conceived and plays out in slow motion with occasional surprises, so let's not put too much stock in the word *thriller*. Readers of crime fiction will open *Christine Falls* and find a finely drawn family drama full of ill-fated love, brotherly betrayal and pre-DNA-testing paternal surprises.

These are Banville's trademarks: beautiful writing about death and loss, and the tricks played by memory when it's tied to tragedy. All of that is here, plus baby trafficking. So why the pseudonym? The pen name is nothing more than a marketing angle, a banner thrown up that reads, LOOK! RESPECTED "LITERARY" AUTHOR SCALING BACK TO WRITE "GENRE!" It's a sentiment we find as annoying as this book was enjoyable.—*Jonathan Messinger*

