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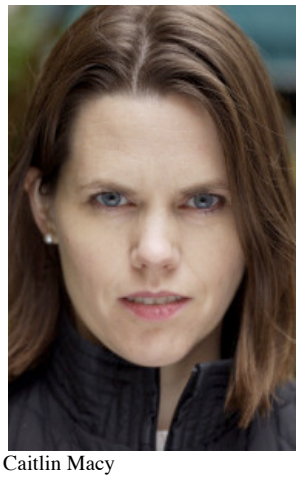
Where the rich really are different, or at least brattier


Caitlin Macy

By Perrin Ireland

SPOILED
By Caitlin Macy
Random House, 220 pp., $24

The issue of privilege is periodically batted about in the class-conscious, literary world, and Caitlin Macy, author of a similarly themed novel, "The Fundamentals of Play," addresses it head-on by titling her story collection "Spoiled." While "privileged" and "spoiled" are not synonymous, they contain enough overlap to form a unifying thread in this accomplished book, which holds a glaring light up to bratty behavior and random acts of character in both children and adults.

In "Christie," originally published in The New Yorker and The O. Henry Prize Stories, the narrator looks down on Christie, whose need to impress leads her to mention she grew up in Greenwich, Conn., within a few minutes of meeting anyone. The narrator decides to "burn the fat" from her life, and lets the relationship lapse, but then discovers she needs Christie for some climbing of her own. Seeing her former friend on the street, she pastes a smile on her face and calls out to her "in a vile moment only Darwin could love."

In "Bait and Switch," the ever-potent relationship between sisters is explored, and the first bratty child of the collection is introduced (polite children also make appearances). The story presents other elements, which pop up in later pages, including women who speak in lock-jaw so as not to be understood by anyone besides their intended audience, and 30-something daughters rebelling against mothers who believe in healthy food, PBS, and helping the less fortunate. The women in "Spoiled" weren't born into privilege, having worked or clawed their way into desirable Manhattan zip codes, and, in general, the men in the book are kinder than the women. It's easy to imagine these characters spilling into each other's lives, and the fact that the stories aren't linked may feel like an opportunity missed.

A note of poignancy surfaces in "The Secret Vote" when a pregnant woman is forced to make a painful choice, but not before responding to an inquiry about whether she's picked a name for her child. "Yes," she replies. "But I've learned not to talk about it. Whatever you say, it turns out the person had a dog named that." Nor does she intend to reference the point of conception in a name: "A toddler in their building called 'Venice' came to mind as a counterexample." Most of these young women are as educated as they are ambitious: "Isn't that just too weird? Isn't it so Handmaid's Tale?"

"Annabel's Mother" illustrates nanny lust, and the desire to be the perfect mother, although there is the moment the narrator chases her daughter through the apartment with a stalk of broccoli screaming threats over the child's reluctance to eat the vegetable.

Through detail and dialogue, the title story provides an incisive set-piece of class differences, as Leigh, the entitled young girl, interacts with her riding instructor, while abusing her horse and her mother. (Leigh observes that the comic book the instructor's daughter reads is "violent and stupid - the kind of thing a boy would read.")

"Bad Ghost" brings us another badly behaved (and sad) child, Helen, cared for by a babysitter, Stacey, who is in over her head, and goes home to behave just as cruelly to her own mother. Helen and Stacey devise a perverse game to while away the afternoons, with the hope of avoiding discovery, and, as always, the reader is supplied with essential information unobtrusively and in a seamless passage between past and present. Helen's professionally successful mother is too busy authoring young-adult novels - "Mom's Coffee Smells Like Gin" and "You Would if You Loved Me" - to see her daughter, and disappears for a week to research adolescent drunken driving.

Years later, Stacey and a more subdued Helen reunite at the mother's funeral, where Stacey notes Helen "has the kind of normalish body you see outside of New York and L.A.," and Stacey discovers what has become of her former charge, who has a sudden burst of conversation, and keeps going "as if, like other shy people Stacey has known, she's either fully off or fully on."

In "Taroudant," a recent New York bride seeks an unconventional honeymoon in Morocco and finds danger in the medina in Marrakesh (although is it too easy to project evil onto this exotic, "other" culture?). The story shows Macy's talent for developing dramatic tension, and her signature twist, while not slighting humor: The narrator bought lacy underwear for the honeymoon "as if she would suddenly emerge the sort of woman who wore it."

The publicity materials for "Spoiled" cheerfully inform that promotional mailings will be made to Junior Leagues and mommy blogs; fortunately, these stories have much to offer the rest of us as well, including the quality of the writing, insight, and wit.

The collection was written prior to the onset of the knuckle-whitening economy in which we now find ourselves, and perhaps Macy's next book will extend her anthropological study and report from this new world.

As a character in "Spoiled" observes, in spite of societal ambivalence toward privilege, it remained "a cake that everyone still wanted to eat."

Perrin Ireland is the author of the novels "Ana Imagined" and, most recently, "Chatter."