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Features

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You'd be weird, too, with a name like Abra Cadaver

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If there is any message to be squeezed from Elizabeth Knox's erotic, hyperimaginative fiction, maybe it is this: Some people simply cannot be filled up by that risky, fated thing we call life. Maybe they are too deep; maybe they are just too full of holes. Yet, ravenous and fearless, they claw gleefully into the squirmy magic of the world, organizing the prostitutes' collective, sharing intriguing breakfasts with sorcerers or photographing the corpse levitating in the palace corridor. Do we wish we were more like them? Sure. But as someone in these pages warns, "You'd get it wrong, don't you see?" and, of course, we would.

Knox, a New Zealander, is largely unknown to U.S. readers, though her previous novel, *The Vintner's Luck*, caused a mild stir when it was published here in 1998. Set amid murders and boiling passions in rural France during the first half of the 19th Century, its story focuses on two unlikely comrades: Sobran Jodeau, a young Burgundian winemaker, and Xas, an angel of smudgy loyalties who visits for a night every summer, always smelling wonderfully of snow. An angel! we barked and flung the book into a corner. But on a second visit a few months later, we gradually grew enchanted with Knox's fable-like tale and its zestful blurring of natural landscapes and supernatural possibilities.

Now here is something even more lush, dark and puzzling.

Black Oxen opens in 2022 in the office of therapist Seán Hart somewhere in or near San Francisco. Carme Risk, a Harvard-educated physician in her mid-40s who

specializes in treating multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, has come here on a quest -- to try to understand her beloved father, so often absent, so burdened by his secret history and strange essence, his life more a state of hovering than of being.

In fact, as we quickly learn, Carme's story first unfolds decades earlier, in the land of her childhood, a mystical corner of what appears to be the Scottish Highlands. She is not yet born. Her future father, 15-year-old Abra Cadaver (get it?), is a scabies-scarred former runaway who may or may not be autistic. On this fine afternoon Abra and his wealthy guardian, Carlin, have gone fishing. When Abra had been here at the river alone the previous Saturday, he had stumbled upon a place where the water split around "what might have been an island, with its own stony beach and trees. . . ." Odd that he cannot locate the spot now. Abra's memory is perfect, although he is "always noticing things, then not knowing what to do about them."

Quite a lot of this same sort of noticing and not knowing, etc., occurs in these pages, often at the expense of Knox's reader who -- stunned by the sudden appearance of a cavalcade of medieval archers on horseback or the image of a three-masted clipper ship whirling in flames -- may succumb to this unsettling reaction: Huh? Knox has said that she based this novel, with its groaning wordplay, large, vividly animated cast and abrupt leaps in time, setting and reality, on a game she invented as a child, and the reader often feels agitated and manipulated, a Monopoly token bouncing helplessly as someone else rolls the dice.

The story grows no more soothing when it shifts to La Host, a dusty town in Lequama, a poor Latin American country that shares its border with Colombia. It is 1987, and

Carme's father, now carrying a British passport that identifies him as Walter Risk, is standing in the sunbeam piercing a cathedral doorway. He has amnesia. When a woman recognizes him, he asks, "Do I know you?" "You're Ido," she replies. "From the Black Room."

Immediately, Ido/Walter finds himself immersed (reimmersed?) in Lequama's revolutionary past, connected not only to the woman at the cathedral, a healer named Ambre Guevara, but also to a quartet of famous activists, the youngest ministers of the 1983 revolutionary government: Ambre's daughter Madlena, now a mother of twins and breeder of polo ponies; Don Marcos Pastrez, a torturer's son who is still education minister; Col. Maria Godshalk, commander of Battalion Amazonia; and Fernando Sola, chief of the indigenous Taoscal tribe. "All four," Knox tells us, "were demagogues."

As in *The Vintner's Luck*, Knox unspools her story episodically, using diary entries to peel back thin layers of a labyrinthine, reelingly fantastic series of intrigues knotted with kidnapped U.S. agents, political disappearances,

torture, civil war, murder, graffiti, hypnotism, medical ethics, purification rites, plots, poets, incest, revenge, catatonia, spirit possession, sorcery, the Universalist Church, eugenics, show biz, cannibalism and freewheeling sex ("Kiss anyone around here," Ido says at one point, "and you close a circuit.")

Knox has provocative, disturbing things to say about how we define identity (racial, sexual, cultural, zoological, national and spiritual). She is obsessed with consciousness, sensation, memory and the ways in which families mold, adapt and define themselves. Her idiosyncratic stylistic impulses, though often irritating, are suave and assured, and she is blessed with a dead-on eye for atmospherics and the telling landscape, from the Brigadoon mists of the Shutling Wood to the humid, sun-baked Lequama road on which "a bus howled past, its engine in low to cope with its load of passengers inside and on its roof, packed as thickly as flower wreaths on the top of a celebrity's coffin."

The poor beasts of Knox's title sometimes have a heavy load to haul in this long, challenging, even exasperating novel, but readers who share their diligence and patience will be startled to find out where the journey takes them and strangely satisfied at its end.

Margaria Fichtner is The Herald's book critic.