

St. Petersburg Times Feb. 18, 1990

THE KNEELING BUS

By Beverly Coyle

Ticknor & Fields, \$18.95

Floridian-turned-New Yorker Beverly Coyle employs so light a touch in this warm and wise novel that it completely charms us long before we feel how much it has taught us. Not surprising, at that, as Coyle's two previous works are studies of Wallace Stevens, the poet who advised, "Poetry should resist the intellect, almost successfully."

This is less a novel than a group of reminiscent vignettes, eight ways of looking at a girl's maturation. Carrie Willis is a pre-adolescent in all but the last piece, an elegiac coda set 30 years after the others. Together, these chapters map Carrie's road from naïve pride toward self-discovery.

Playing beneath the events is a paean to a vanished Florida, an early fifties era when its east coast was more arcadian than even its west coast is now. "I remember the Florida towns in that time well," Carrie says, "so sleepy and ringing with no sound at all. Men and women lingered like drugged bees in the intense sun." But in the end, her Florida finds "its environment on the brink, its ecology out of whack."

Coyle composes her best episodes with a blend of humor and portentous imagery. In "The Seventh Day," Carrie, 10, gets a visit from her grandmother, recently converted to Seventh Day Adventist. While the grandmother and Carrie's parents debate doctrine—the grandmother even resorting to numerology to argue that the Pope is the Antichrist—Carrie cares for a new pet parakeet whose wings she refuses to clip. She knows the parakeet will likely fly away, and fears that day, while all the while dreaming of the day she will escape to become a missionary in Africa. When he does fly away, she pursues him with her mother pursuing her, one flight foreshadowing the other.

Her mother will become the clearest mirror in which Carrie sees herself, but there are others. There is her great-Aunt Dove, whom Carrie loves "as much as anyone could have expected of me," an eccentric spinster from Valdez, Celery Capital of the World. In one alternately comic and touching story, the elderly woman is both taken in yet brought to life by a traveling con man. Watching it happen, Carrie comes to recognize the depth and complexity of this woman she thought she knew: "I sat thinking about the complicated beads making up a person's life—how one's hair is not always gray, how one is not so much a fixed body as a set of poses put together in a child's flipbook: begin at the beginning and all the scenes of my aunt's life moved as one; the young and old in her joined at the head as I watched jumping girleens of all ages, all the same woman."

With the death of a beautiful classmate, sixth-grader Carrie has her first brush with her own mortality and finds deep elements of piety, vengefulness and lost dreams brought to her surface. She senses her hope of being a missionary about to disappear, "or

it might never disappear quite. It might stay out there my whole life, turning like a piece of foil caught in a tree where I could see it once in a while, sending little signals to me with every gentle, stupid gust of breeze. I was a weak sort of person, I saw that now, like most people."

Always, there's Carrie's mother, kindly but to Carrie's girlish eyes narrow and even dull. Carrie can romanticize a friend's mother to the point where she will forgive her the worst of crimes but cannot forgive her own mother even an irritating mannerism.

But at the end, at 40, Carrie sees in her now-widowed mother the true nature of unconditional love. The final section, "Not Long for This World," which will make it impossible to ever again read *As You Like It* without a lump in the throat, brings the mother to visit Carrie in Manhattan. Aunt Dove has died and left Carrie's mother a fortune. Wanting only a quiet normal life, the mother is confused by her new wealth. Carrie's impatient condescension and the scene's powerful moment of realization evoke memories of Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," right down to the crucial part played by a bus, where we are isolated within a small enough segment of humanity to recognize each other, and sometimes ourselves.

Even though a life history does emerge in these gracefully and affably written stories, they may not quite form a novel. They do, however, announce the presence of Beverly Coyle as a compelling and important new writer of fiction.