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The Voice of America: Stories

By Rick DeMarinis

Norton. 224 pp.

There are more gifted American story writers today than ever before. Still, ours is the era of the literary safe bet, staying well within the compass, a flash of ice and a hope the reader sees the rest of an iceberg underneath. Often there is no iceberg, just a sideways glance at a moment and fear of taking a chance.

In this time of finite variety, Rick DeMarinis's freewheeling new collection becomes especially welcome. Filled with a lively chorus of narrative voices and a crowd of quirky characters, these stories run the gamut from abject bleakness to creative hope.

DeMarinis succeeds because he doesn't fear failing, and of these 15 stories some don't make it: "Paraiso: An Elegy" grows didactic, "Horizontal Snow" lacks the author's usual empathy and "Rudderless Fiction" is, frankly, rudderless. Most of the remaining stories, however, are gems.

As he did in his 1989 novel *The Year of the Zinc Penny*, DeMarinis shows a particular flair for adolescent characters. Miles, a 19 year-old home on leave from the Air Force, experiences his sexual initiation from the girl across the street and his true coming of age when she draws into focus for him what matters over a lifetime. There's the chilling, nameless 17 year-old narrator of the title story, a deadpan narrative set circa 1952. After thrashing "Pop," his ineffectual Bible-quoting mother's fourth husband, the boy spends the night cruising, vandalizing, stealing and womanizing, all the while scanning the radio for the Voice of America, ignorant that the voice of America is his own.

Most endearing is Charlie of "Safe Forever." At 11, Charlie's hopes of being a bomber pilot are dashed on V-J Day. His mother ending her second marriage, his best friend falling to polio, Charlie's life is further bent by the paradoxes of wartime. The Hiroshima atomic bomb would "make things normal again"; its mushroom cloud contains a genie that will enable people to have all the things war did not permit. Surrounded by vivid period details--iron lungs, B-29s, Vacutex--Charlie learns to face a hard world with imagination and grit.

DeMarinis invents more offbeat characters than anyone this side of T. Coraghessan Boyle, yet with deeper compassion and without Boyle's excessive self-amusement. "Aliens" features a repo man who prefers *Star Trek* dialogue to communication. "Fidelity" puts a new twist on what someone might do to ensure his wife's peace of mind. The Ring Lardneresque narrator of "The Whitened Man" is a mobile home park manager who wears a pistol and installs monitors and tape recorders to

peep into the lives of tenants while constantly professing his nobility of character. Even he looks tame next to the obsessive narrator of "Insulation" who is haunted by lightning.

Many characters here have reached midlife by taking the easy way, letting circumstances steer their lives into ruts of quiet desperation. Fred Ocean in "Desert Places" is barely middle aged yet already old. His relationship with his 16 year-old daughter is "a bitchy little war of hit-and-run raids and long-range sniping." Other stories depict burned-out high school teachers and abandoned husbands riddled with nostalgia.

Most delightful, by far, are the twinned stories about Gregory Pastori. DeMarinis pulls the literary life inside out sketching this once-serious writer now writing pulp romance novels under the pen name Veronica LaMonica. In "God Bless America," Gregory is reproached by his friend Dunkie, a "serious" but bad writer convinced his 1500-page historical opus will blow Melville out of the water. Jaded Gregory feels poor Dunkie doesn't realize "we are living in the Great Age of Criticism and that fiction itself has taken a back seat to theories of fiction" so that deconstructionists now reduce literature to a "cultural twitch." Besides, Gregory's novels earn him six figures each-- God Bless America. A shake-up waits for Gregory, however, in the droll "Her Alabaster Skin" when he meets Paula Voorhees, the model hired to portray Veronica at book signings, who in the words of Gregory's mechanic-turned-editor has "great torque . . . fantastic gear ratios . . . the classic lines of an XKE Jag."

Lacing insight with charity, masterful voices with hilarious lines, *The Voice of America* is a sparkling collection.