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OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

By Katherine Weber

Crown; 262 pp.

Sometimes, the best way to see inward is to look outward, because, as even Brutus knew, "The eye sees not itself but by reflection, by some other things." At the core of Katherine Weber's auspicious debut novel are a cat's cradle of reflective images.

For Harriet Rose, 26, the voyage toward self-understanding must pass through reflections cast by her grandmother, mother and, especially, her best friend, Anne Gordon. Once her Greenwich Village apartment-mate, Anne now lives in Geneva where Harriet, a promising photographer, has just arrived for a month-long visit thanks to a travel fellowship.

But Anne has changed. Once, Harriet says, they were able to "finish each other's sentences. We just *knew* each other as women can, as men so rarely do....[We] used to feel almost telepathically connected." Now, however, only Anne's exterior seems alive: "Her new look seems to derive from scarves and boots and sunglasses in the hair.... She's frighteningly accessorized." Something once alive within her, though, has died. She's becoming "a woman with a gray soul." Anne sneaks home each lunchtime for a "nooner" with her married, much older boss, Victor Marks.

Perhaps Harriet should not be surprised. The product of a Holocaust-surviving father and a mother who drowned when Anne was 13, Anne has always been drawn to fatherly, safe, unavailable men, starting when she was in Bennington ("where she majored in angst") and had an affair with her French literature professor. These men, no doubt, filled the void of her father who only "went through all the motions of living...but was merely marking time, simulating a life."

Much of this we learn in the first third of the novel, "a mixture of blather and reflection" written as journal notes addressed to Harriet's idealized new lover, Benedict Thorne. In the second third, Weber fills in the gaps in Harriet's own history, what has made her so tempted to rescue Anne. Molded by the patrician superciliousness of her grandmother and a home crushed by the childhood death from respiratory failure of her older brother, Harriet has seen what happens when rescue comes too late (her brother), in time (a next-door victim of child abuse) and unwanted (a dwarf offered undesired help).

Fortunately, the novel's closing third begins with the Thorne protecting his Rose, as Benedick arrives in Geneva "to rescue [Harriet] from rescuing Anne." Emotional rescues, we know, seldom achieve more than the destruction of the rescuer.

Almost too good to be true, Benedict drifts toward the background, for Weber's scrutiny stays fixed on the relationships between women, their supportiveness,

competitiveness, intimacy and mirroring. We see, too, how such relationships change when they are transplanted, even how women see a different femininity abroad: "Women from most Western European countries walk, talk, and look at themselves in the mirror with an enormous amount of confidence that American woman lack," Harriet notes.

And, Weber suggests, women come to understand themselves by more circuitous routes, if perhaps more deeply, than men. Unlike Benedict, a painter renowned for his self-portraits, Harriet shoots pictures "based on reflections in shop windows...mirror self-portraits" which become, finally, simply a metaphor for how she actually does come to know herself.

For it is Weber, not Harriet, holding the novel's many mirrors up, and she is a wordsmith, not a visual artist. In fact, Weber takes this grim plot outline and infuses it with vibrancy with a steady barrage of linguistic brio, a constant flow of comic wordplay that at times seems almost imitative of Lorrie Moore: "We who are about to dine salute you," her friend has become "Anne of Cleavage."

But if once or twice Weber goes for the line that's clever instead of the line that's true, most of the time she provides a blend of artistry and insight far beyond what we usually see in a first novel. This debut offering trumpets loudly that Weber's is a new talent well worth watching.