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TALLER WOMEN

A cautionary tale

By Lawrence Naumoff

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Laced through the fresh vision and sprightly energy of Lawrence Naumoff's third novel is the conviction that lasting, loving relationships are less likely now than ever.

Monroe Hopkins, a North Carolina emergency room physician, thinks the problem may be that "women are taller than they used to be." They demand equality. His ex-wife, Katy, grew "too tall" and left him, and his current live-in girlfriend, Lydia, who like Monroe is in her forties, is getting taller and more confrontational and on his nerves. Where, Monroe wonders, can he find a woman "who did not later turn out to be crazy, or sad, or depressed, or desperate"?

Perhaps next door. In that house lives 18-year-old Ronnie Cutler, childlike, spontaneous and flakier than a buttermilk biscuit. The nubile high school drop-out struggles to reinvent herself, shed contemporary molds and revert to an earlier one by heading West to become a cowgirl. Cowgirls, Monroe hopes, don't get the blues. Unlike modern, tall women, when a cowgirl says "I'm yours" she'll stay in her place and keep her promise.

First, Monroe must force the badgering Lydia out the door. He tries indifference: "Do you love me, or don't you?" Lydia asks, and Monroe responds "'Sure,' looking at his watch." He moves on to emotional betrayal and finally force. In a genuinely sympathetic scene, Lydia, who's "tired of starting over again with a new man all the time," makes one final effort to communicate with Monroe only to give up in abject frustration. Nothing we'd seen of her in the relationship becomes her like the leaving it.

After a haunting visit by Katy, on whom the book's final section centers, Monroe can take Ronnie, "the most perfect woman on earth," and head for their illusory frontier

where time never runs out. "I'll be anything you want me to be," she says. "I know you will, sweet girl," he answers. "That's why I love you so much."

Naumoff spins farce and ghoulish imagery into a web of analysis of why contemporary love stands so little chance. His surreal surface humor does not mask his despair. Reduced to one central idea—and the novel's richness makes such reduction risky—Naumoff believes that when we say "I love you" it is only the "I" that matters to us.

His primary target is men, personified in Robert whom the novel continually insists is in fact better than most. It is the novel's men who insist on stasis, who fear women's autonomy or growth, and have molded the female psyche to believe that if love fails the fault must lie in her. It is men who shun communication, undervalue the gift of offered love and view themselves as a kind of sun around whom the woman revolves in planetary dependence. If she lapses in her constant subservience, he'll just find himself an awestruck nymphet like Ronnie.

The allure of the world's Ronnies to fortyish men, Naumoff implies, lies not in an attempt to recapture the youth slipping from middle age. Energetic teenagers, if initially making them feel young, inevitably will make them soon feel old. Nor does Ronnie's appeal lie in a cultural aesthetic insisting that in women beauty presumes youth. Rather, men perceive a vulnerability and unformed potential, fresh as new clay. Ronnie can be rescued, shaped, controlled. She inspires Monroe's lust not for youth or sex, but power. If we find wisdom in Jung's assertion that "where love rules, there is no will to power; and where power predominates, love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other," we see why Naumoff believes men are doomed by the egoism and misogyny of their own goal.

Naumoff's women share some blame. Regardless of age or personal evolution, every woman in the novel needs and insists upon having some relationship. None feels complete without a man, except during a momentary respite or healing. If Naumoff's

men are driven by power, his women are guided by illusion, pursuing romantic love in an eternal quest to transform an ideal vision into a day-to-day reality.

The novel crackles with metaphors and parables portraying women as victims: women with leashes around their necks, blithely eating their own flesh, humiliating themselves, injuring brain tissue to preclude memory, sticking fingers into Chinese handcuffs, and, most striking, women in knife-throwing acts strapped to revolving wheels while their husbands hurl knives at them.

Vivid imagery and a sugar-coating of humor help both to smooth and enhance this "cautionary tale"'s provocative disquietude. They also, unfortunately, augment some of its stylistic flaws. Naumoff mars his wit with moments of self-amusing archness, even buffoonery. Pasting narrative together with short expository essays and mannered or omitted transition, he moves the plotline round and round and in and out like a yo-yo, alternately whimsical and unsettling. *Taller Women* grows as digressive as *Beowulf*, seldom to as grand effect. He misplaces "only" with maddening frequency. Most damaging, he impugns character with too broad a brushstroke, implying that what is often true is always true. Thus, when we're finally told Monroe's ex-wife has found a good man we no longer believe the author suspects such men exist.

If little cultural criticism here is original, Naumoff presents it so vibrantly that it yields new shocks of recognition. Few readers will feel themselves much like any of his characters, yet the imperfections they caricature seem so familiar that at the end, like Monroe and Ronnie, we feel we too are heading toward a vanishing past that is always a new, perilous territory.