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SIGNS OF DEVOTION

By Maxine Chernoff

Simon & Schuster. 222 pp. \$18

It has been said that "truth is shorter than fiction." Few, however, would dare suggest truth is shorter than poetry. Chicago writer Maxine Chernoff, the Carl Sandburg Award-winning author of five volumes of poetry, writes fiction with a poet's compression, stripped to only the barest essentials. The 20 stories in *Signs of Devotion* average fewer than ten pages each, but most speak volumes about how clumsily we grope for and miss intimacy in contemporary America.

Chernoff catches her people off-guard, unsheltered by the ruts of daily routine. No fewer than five stories concern people on vacation.

In the chilling "Death Swap," with a gallows wit and a lyricist's gift for yoking mutually enhancing images, Chernoff presents a California lobbyist visited on vacation by her father and his 11 year-old stepdaughter. This younger replacement introduces her to a game where you can swap a living person for a dead one. Not surprisingly, the vacation turns sour. Other vacationers fare better, as in "The Stockholm Syndrome" and "The River Shannon," where people have flings and fall in love, but even they grow distracted, musing on our failure to enhance each other's happiness.

Two vacation stories are among the best in the collection. Seldom have two people personified the difference between seeing a glass as half-empty or half-full better than the middle-aged couple touring Paris in "Baudelaire's Drainpipe" (Chernoff has a genius for titles). The trip frustrates the husband's haughty demand for perfection, but the wife is sustained by believing, "It's better to have seen Baudelaire's drainpipe than to have missed the house altogether." She notes all they have seen together—a lock of Keats's hair, Apollinaire's grave—while he moans how they missed the Pope in Yankee Stadium and Simon and Garfunkel in Central Park. As he snorts in disdain, she wonders "how I could love this man," but the answer is clear, and lies in the lover rather than the loved.

Partly a lark in which Chernoff makes Henry Fieldingesque intrusions inside the frame of her story, "Where Events May Lead" explores how we sabotage a marriage. Claiming he works hard and needs peace, a husband vacations alone and sends his wife and small children to a dude ranch. While he contemplates an affair, his wife, dazed on someone else's allergy medication, actually has one. The narrator steps in to propose two alternative endings, one that could strengthen the marriage, another that is more likely.

Most of Chernoff's best pieces are toughminded glimpses of family alienation, homes where the beams of love prove too hot to bear. The title story portrays a cat's cradle of abandonments and infidelities and people "who'd pieced together a life from

others' leftovers"; they will endure their trials as long as they're not be forced to talk about them. "November" mixes powerful elements, as a father goes off to research disasters in Bangladesh while at home his wife has a private disaster and their son struggles with the mysteries of love, sex and growing up. "As Sure As Albert Schweitzer" is a laughing-through-the-tears portrait of a family that cannot show love, possibly because they cannot feel it.

Chernoff's world is filled with emotional vagabonds, like the man in "Six-Oh" who feels comfortable being an exhibitionist when alone with his apartment shades up but cannot speak to someone on the same couch.

Beyond the recognitions inherent in how accurately she renders this world, what makes Chernoff more than a poet dabbling in fiction are her versatility and masterful technique.

This collection is a technical tour de force of range. Ten stories are told in third person, ten in first person. Seven are in present tense, four are related in convincing male viewpoints and one is told from a dual viewpoint. Chernoff's tone can stretch from Lorrie Moore wisecracking ("Imagine a street named after Richard Chamberlain,' Nora told Katy. 'Shogun Street?") to the genial Jewish motherism of "The Stockholm Syndrome" to pained articulations of generational chasms: "His generation had fought or protested the Vietnam War and refrained from joining in family life until it was too late to master it properly."

Chernoff brings colorful descriptive skill to her keen eye for detail. A car is "a two-tone sedan colored like toast with jelly." A building "resembled an asphalt-siding rendition of an Argyle sock." A neglected garden "looks like it hasn't survived a meteor shower." Often these descriptions reveal character, as when an intriguing woman draws a map: "She used a calligraphic pen. The arrow she drew to indicate north seemed capable of flight."

Especially effective are the brushstrokes that paint people: "They were identical twins, the type that plot arson in secret code," "Anyone observing Drummond and Gail at parties, hunched together, whispering like mutinous sailors on an ill-fated voyage, would have called their marriage a success." One woman looks "like a drawing of simple beauty, one that a fourteen year-old-girl might make." Another "displays her left shoulder with the flair of a waiter exhibiting the catch of the day." An elderly woman "looks ecstatic, like a college sophomore who's just discovered Sartre." One man "slouches like laundry" while another "resembled a younger Lawrence Welk if Lawrence Welk were a redhead with black glasses."

At her best, which is most of the time, Chernoff's descriptions reveal the viewers as much as what they view, like the resentful woman observing a girl: "Kathy's angularity clashes with the table they've chosen," or the woman who notes, "The problem with Walter is that you want to spill gravy on his tie when he's not even wearing one."

If some included stories feel thin rather than subtle, the great majority prove Chernoff a wise and witty witness to how we fail to live most of the moments of our lives.