The Devil You Know
by Jenn Farrell

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

Vancouver’s Jenn Farrell broke upon the Canadian literary scene in 2006 with Sugar Bush & Other Stories, which was remarkable for the directness of the language, the perfect pitch of the dialogue, and the laugh-out-loud comedy. Farrell’s was a fresh and provocative voice that demanded attention.

She’s back with a new collection – The Devil You Know – that brings together seven lively yarns and a couple of short-shorts. This book seems more edgy and more explicit than the first, not as funny but equally stirring.

Farrell opens the book with “Day of the Dead,” in which Samantha has to deal with her estranged mother’s death. The scenes in the funeral parlour are authentic and arresting, as Sam tries to deal with “services director” Michael’s questions. When he asks about last wishes, she says:

“Well, my mother wanted to be cremated and then have her remains thrown into the trash. She was always a bit of a drama queen that way. But even though I’m going to totally ignore her and her stupid wishes, I’d like to keep things as simple as possible.” (12)

Bitter as she is about the way her mother treated her and being the only one who can tend to the funeral, Sam is also craving tactile contact with a man. Her wily but desperate attempts to attract Michael seem doomed.

The strength of “Solitaire” comes from the point of view of elementary-school-age Ginny. Her mother Debby has left Dwayne, the fellow she and Ginny have been living with since Ginny’s dad died, and the two of them seek refuge at Debby’s parents’ cottage. Friction develops between Debby and her mother, causing Ginny to turn for comfort to her grandfather. And then who should show up next door but Debby’s old high-school friend Ed, a beer-guzzling deer hunter – “another bum,” as Debby’s mother puts it. Farrell nicely captures the angst between generations from the innocent perspective of a child.

The brief but funny “Tested” is reminiscent of the popular movie Juno, chronicling the critical few minutes it takes for an anxious teen-aged girl to give herself a drug-store pregnancy test. The teen voice is totally accurate: “I’m so nervous I get a bit of pee on my hand. Gross. . . . You’re not supposed to shake the test around or blow on it or anything, just leave it alone for three minutes. I get out my iPhone and set the timer.” (40)

Less appealing is “Soft Limits,” in which Susanna tells of her affair with a married cook named Troy. For a time she falls for his love-making technique, which involves bondage – she finds the pain liberating – but then she finds out he’s mostly interested in documenting everything on film.

“Grimsby Girls” is a compendium of fourteen short takes, fourteen different women’s answers to the question, How did you lose your virginity? Here’s how three of them begin:

“It was on the beach, but not the way you might envision, because it was at Lake Ontario in November. There was even a bit of snow on the ground. . . .” (69)

“It was in my garage, but it’s not as bad as it sounds. Okay, it’s still pretty bad . . .” (69)

“Well, okay. File it under the least romantic thing that’s ever happened to me. Well, the first part was fine, but the rest . . .” (82)
Each reminiscence is followed by some general insight. The experiences are funny, sad, awkward – never too enjoyable for the participants.

The best story is “Communion,” which in every way – candour, engaging characters, bang-on dialogue and straight-ahead narrative – completely fulfils the promise of Farrell’s first collection. It’s about two young women, Emily and Carrie. Emily has moved away to another city after breaking up with her boyfriend. Carrie has taken Emily by surprise by moving in with her without any advance notice; Carrie, who “wouldn’t do or wear anything that might make one less guy in the world be one iota less attracted to her. She had to have everyone hot for her or she felt like a hideous failure” (53).

It’s Christmas Eve and the two of them go out on the town, getting high and staying out all night. The concluding sequence is marvellously funny and moving as Carrie decides, as they go past a Catholic church on their way home, to attend the morning service in her fishnets and cutoffs. Emily, feeling terribly sick, reluctantly follows.

They stepped inside and Carrie dipped her fingers in the holy water and crossed herself. Emily did the same but couldn’t remember the right order. Spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch – but what side was the watch and what side was the wallet? . . . When the Mass started, she tried to follow along with whatever everyone else was doing, feeling like a neon sign was flashing SINNER over her head. (60)

“Communion” is Jenn Farrell at her best, itself worth the price of this entertaining and often startling collection. ✩

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist and reviewer.

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