

Key in Lock

by Rona Altrows

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Reviewed by Dave Williamson

In her new collection of short fiction, *Key in Lock*, Calgary's Rona Altrows offers a number of female first-person narrators dwelling on their current worries about their bodies or their livelihoods or their relationships. The worries usually take the form of questions the women ask themselves:

Can't a person set his or her sights lower in the world of day jobs, while trying to achieve greater personal depth or enlightenment or whatever? Or, for that matter, why can't a person underachieve without being deemed a failure? If I have a good work ethic and can competently do the job that I am hired to do, shouldn't that be enough? (68)

Most of the 27 selections are anecdotes more than full-fledged stories, and the narrators sound like the same person. Ten of them *are* the same person – Irene, who appeared in Altrows's first book, *A Run On Hose*.

Irene has been working for 32 years at Marjorie's Lingerie, and her friends tend to drop into the store to chat rather than to buy. When Sandra tells Irene about her corn-cob-sucking ritual, Irene says: "We've all got queer habits that we don't reveal away from home. Personally, I have a thing about keeping my navel spotless, completely clear of lint. But it's not something I take care of when I'm out on the sales floor dealing with customers." (139)

In the title story, Irene tells how incontinence has affected her relationships with men. Other stories flash back to Irene's teen years in Montreal, one showing the consequences of dating a boy as a favour to her friend Doreen.

"Syntocenon" deals effectively with a miscarriage, while "Blue Thread" uses a Q-and-A format to discuss menopause. "Duck for Cover, Joan" is an all-too-brief attempt, in skit form, to satirize job interviews. "Oxymoronic" sensitively shows a girl, Lisa, coming to terms with her close friendship with a gay boy. In an unconvincing story called "Down Low," Gwen's husband has cheated on her with a gay fellow in his office.

In "Renovations," Alyssa becomes so sick of men ogling and manhandling her bosom, she has breast-reduction surgery. She returns in "Voila" to muse on the effects of second-hand clothing on her work.

Though only four pages long, "Seventeen Teaspoons of Sugar" stands out because the female narrator sounds different from all the rest: "That is how gorgeous she is, my Erica, and also always telling the truth, my angel. If I am sounding like I love her better than Molly excuse me, but who would you love more, that Jennifer girl [on *Friends*] or a living tub of lard with falsehoods coming out of her mouth?" (169)

"Soft Dressing" is one of only two third-person narrations that, unlike most of the stories, builds suspense in telling of Felicia, who's had too many lousy relationships with men. The climax of the story is funny and appropriate.

The best selection features Irene. Called “Silent Partner,” it engages you immediately with this sentimental but amusing opening paragraph:

Mitchell has nodded off. He’s got his mother’s long lashes, and eyelids so delicate they are almost transparent. His eyes race back and forth under those lids. I think that means he is dreaming. What do you dream about when you’ve only been out of the womb for four months? The warmth of your mother’s full breast? The sweetness of her milk? The ring of your father’s laugh? What would a nightmare be about? Being left alone. Filling your pants up and getting cold, then hungry. Crying your lungs out for help. (29)

A young woman friend, Renata, has left her baby with Irene while she’s in a Marjorie’s Lingerie fitting room. Renata says she wishes her own mother were like Irene. Irene reflects on how she and her husband postponed having a baby until they were in their mid-thirties, and then they talked endlessly about it, finally tried, were unsuccessful, and then he was killed in a car crash.

This story achieves a depth of feeling that few of the others do, showing how a woman, who hasn’t been a mother and now can’t be, feels when asked to hold a friend’s “soft and beautiful” baby. Author Altrows nicely captures the mixed emotions.

Key in Lock is like a bag of light and fluffy popcorn that contains two or three pleasantly substantial surprises. ♡

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist and reviewer.