

*Shrinking Violets*

by Heidi Greco

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Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Personally, I'm attracted to skinny books, the way they acknowledge the limitations on my time, my immersion in a culture dominated by 30-, 60-, and 90-minute story times. And the way they whisper "poetry" without actually saying the word. These benefits accompany Heidi Greco's 120-page novella, *Shrinking Violets*.

In addition to its slimness, the cover of *Shrinking Violets* is also very attractive. A beautiful photo of a sculpture of a grieving woman entrapped or imprisoned within some sort of cage. That's the story in a snapshot. The woman is Reggie, the narrator, looking back, in 2011, over the past twenty years of her life as an orange-haired child, a sexually active teenager, a young woman who had a few lovers, a single mother, a disappointed bride, a bored wife. Reggie, a cashier in Safeway, is an avid "doer" of crossword puzzles and a woman afflicted with nightmares.

The term "shrinking violet" is an English idiom used to imply "shyness" in a child, usually a girl. Greco's novella gives voice to the shy and the voiceless, to children and other victims. Reggie is a wage slave, alone and isolated, whose only meaningful relationship is with her young son, Nicky. Work is not fulfilling, offering limited opportunities to interact even with co-workers. But it is "safe" and the paycheque provides shelter. Yet as a mother, Reggie fears that she is not providing enough for her son. A dog. A house with a yard so they can get a dog. A father figure in his life. The pressures of guilt and feelings of inadequacy influence her decisions, compromised by the desire to do what is perceived to be best for the children, what society expects, for the security of a house and home. Reggie marries a man she knows is "not quite right" for her because he fills those other absences in her son's life.

*Shrinking Violets* is a remarkable telling of an unremarkable protagonist's disturbing story. The writer's challenge is to be able to communicate to readers things that Reggie the narrator may not fully comprehend herself. Greco accomplishes this task by her skillful use of suspense and her mastery of style. Her poetic use of diction adds to the reader's apprehensions. "Shrinking violets" references a child's mis-hearing of "violence" as "violets" (73). The husband's name, "Harmon," makes us wonder; does it allude to "harmony" or "harm"? The crossword puzzles and the nightmares intertwine until we begin to recognize that the dreams are sending enigmatic clues: blindness, sexualized children, missing out on life, deformity, damage, dead babies. Reggie's subconscious is trying to communicate, to make known what is sensed but not admitted. Thus *Shrinking Violets* is also about how we are to determine whether something is simply an annoyance or truly a warning sign, and about the carelessness with which we listen or do not listen to our intuition and our dreams.

*Shrinking Violets* was co-winner of the 2011 Ken Klonsky novella contest. It should be mentioned that if this novella were a television show or a movie, it would warrant an R rating and a viewer/parental advisory for language, explicit sex, and violence. Yet these issues too are part of the problem. The privacy of intimate relationships and unvoiced social expectations are part of the set-up, putting Reggie into the position she is in. Since the story, told in a straightforward way, is depressing and

disturbing, the beauty of the novella is in the art, the style, the poetic language Greco uses to describe a life recalled, and a beautiful mother/child relationship, in images of “angel wings” (103), of blood and snow (116).

*Shrinking Violets* is a brave novel that celebrates the duty of artists to speak for those who cannot, whatever their prisons may be; to help the victims, if they cannot escape the cage, at least be able to sing – an ode, a ballad, a lament. ♪

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