Suitable Precautions
by Laura Boudreau

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

There is nothing like good old gore to lift a short story out of the bland. While this debut collection by Toronto’s Laura Boudreau is not exactly awash in blood, most of the thirteen short stories, while often playfully appealing, do have a morbid tinge.

“The D and D Report” is narrated by Alexa, who tells of meeting Cheryl while they both worked as lifeguards between school years. Their supervisor Len’s weekly briefings, dubbed “Dead and Deader Reports” by Cheryl (shortened to “D and D” by Len), consist of “Len bringing in articles about people dying, or almost dying, in swimming pools, usually after doing something stupid. There was the guy who took a swan dive off a hotel balcony into a wading pool during frosh week, and the parents who let their five-year-old cook her brain in a hot tub while they went to the swim-up bar” (97).

The story deals mostly with the friendship of Alexa and Cheryl – how Cheryl wrote the paper for Alexa’s medical school application, and how their paths through life veered sharply away from each other.

“The Vosmak Genealogy” borders on being a family saga, highlighted by a terrible accident. Narrator Dora’s mother Anna is, as a child, crushed by a picnic table that had been standing on its end in disuse for the winter but came loose from its moorings: “She suffered a compressed spine, a fractured skull, a concussion, a broken wrist, a dislocated shoulder, deep lacerations to her face that would leave scars, and a punctured lung. Several of her ribs had splintered like chicken bones” (160).

Anna undergoes expensive operations and a lengthy rehabilitation period, and she emerges with her good nature intact but not her imagination. Through her school years, she is unable to think abstractly.

Author Boudreau proceeds to indulge in dark comedy. “At the age of twenty-seven, my mother announced at Sunday dinner that she was pregnant by an exterminator who had come to the house and been delayed by a sudden downpour. My mother had invited him to stay for coffee, she explained, and then sex” (163). Throughout the pregnancy, Anna’s mother berates herself while moaning over and over, “An exterminator? Such a lack of imagination” (163).

Anna gives birth to Dora and keeps a record of Dora’s childhood years, eventually turning it into books – this unimaginative woman ironically becomes a successful children’s author.

In “Strange Pilgrims,” Ella buys a house and finds thousands of dollars hidden in the attic. She hides the money around her yard and senses a link between it and letters she begins to receive from Italy. Ella becomes romantically involved with the postman, and the story moves to a gory but ambiguous conclusion. Similarly, a few other stories seem to raise more questions than answers.

“The Party” and “Monkfish” are not so much stories as brief but provocative glimpses of social gatherings.

“The Dead Dad Game” features two children, Elaine – the narrator – and Nate, and Elaine’s oddly appealing mother, Natalie. Nate and Elaine have the same father, who has died, as has Nate’s mother,
Genevieve. When they visit their dad’s grave, Natalie has them lie on the ground to listen for vibrations: “Our mother said that visualization was an important part of the game, and she always seemed to hear things, grunts and mumbles. I just needed to visualize harder, and then I would hear it too” (43). The story goes on to explore their relationship with a next-door neighbour named Mr. Crisander and his pet female pig, Mickey.

The most engaging story is “Poses,” because of 12-year-old Lauren’s lively narrative voice. She talks about such disparate things as faking an epileptic fit while buying cigarettes, and showing her dad’s collection of girlie magazines to her friend Alice. About her sister Margot, who has quit school, she says, “Sometimes when people, mostly people like old Girl Guide leaders, the ones with pleated pants and dumpy bums, run into her at the grocery store where she works, they’ll ask her what she’s planning to do in the fall. Get pregnant, maybe, she says. Or drunk” (59).

The denouement of this amusing story is unfortunately revealed in the back-cover blurb.

Laura Boudreau is currently living in London, England. Suitable Precautions was voted one of the top five best books of 2011 by readers of The National Post.

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg writer whose latest books are Dating: A Novel and Changing People’s Lives: An Illustrated History of Red River College, both published in 2012.

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