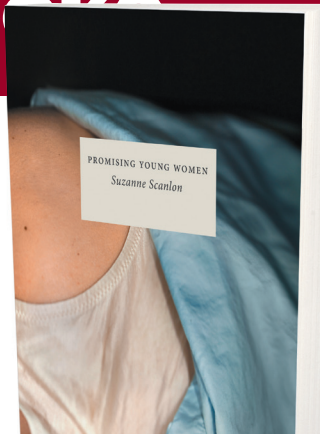


Books



Edited by
Laura Pearson
books@timeoutchicago.com



Books

Daring Dorothy

A thoughtfully curated publishing project releases two new inventive novels. By **Laura Pearson**

Partway through *Fra Keeler*, Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi's haunting novel, the unnamed narrator realizes that everyone, at any given point, is privately "probing their lives." They're "stacking their days, straightening their hours..." It's comforting to his busy mind, even though his own thoughts veer toward the paranoid: death, mysterious phone calls from Ancestry.com and the mailman's conspiratorial stare. Rather than adding order to his days, his obsessive circumspection leaves him dizzy and disoriented. Van der Vliet Oloomi's labyrinthine language and surreal imagery—blood, goats, a phantom yurt—have a similar effect on the reader.

The book is new from Dorothy, a St. Louis-based publishing project that simultaneously releases two books each fall (\$16 each or \$25 for two). This year's other release is Suzanne Scanlon's novel *Promising Young Women*, an equally absorbing and original look at mental illness. (Full disclosure: Scanlon has written theater reviews for *Time Out Chicago*.) In it, a woman named Lizzie drifts through various psychiatric institutions, recounting fellow patients, brushes with death and moments of surprising clarity. "The thing is when you're sick or when they call you sick you start acting like that," she admits. Like *Fra Keeler*, *Promising Young Women* traces an inward journey punctuated

by crisis, but it's told in lovely fragments that jump around in time and switch narrative points of view—a clever choice since Lizzie, as patient and actress, frequently assumes different roles.

"Both books are inventive but in totally different ways," says Dorothy editor Danielle Dutton. "The only thing I'm really looking for is something that takes risks and is really fantastic." The 36-year-old founded Dorothy three years ago after working at Dalkey Archive Press in Champaign-Urbana and learning all aspects of book publishing. Now a writer and assistant professor at Washington University, she says putting out just two books per year is manageable but also "enough that we don't just fall off the radar."

She chooses works of fiction or near fiction that draw on different aesthetic traditions to showcase literature's "endless stylistic and formal variety." Dutton, who grew up a Jane Austen fan, first embraced such variety after attending the School of the Art Institute for her M.F.A. ("I loved meeting all of these crazy people there who read all these crazy books. It just sort of blew my head off," she says) and the avant-leaning University of Denver for her doctorate.

It's no coincidence that *Promising Young Women* and *Fra Keeler* are written by women: Dorothy encourages submissions by women writers, and only one of its six books was authored by a male (writing under a female pseudonym). Coincidentally, this year's authors are both first-time novelists currently based in the Midwest: Scanlon lives in Chicago and teaches at Columbia College; Van der Vliet Oloomi lives in Indiana and teaches at Notre Dame. Both books feature cover art by Chicago artists: a painting of a woodland scene by Elijah Burgher, and a digital portrait of a woman reclining in bed by Ben Gest, respectively.

"I'm looking for something that takes risks and is really fantastic."

As for those attractive covers, Dutton has always made them a priority. "People are really drawn to aesthetically pleasing objects. We're like magpies," she says. That's why she named the project after her great aunt Dorothy, a librarian who sent her beautiful editions of children's books on every holiday. "I would treasure them," Dutton says. "Now I love to think about what a book should feel like and look like in a reader's hands."

Both authors read at Corbett vs. Dempsey Friday 5. See *Listings*.

Big Ray



By **Michael Kimball**. Bloomsbury USA, \$23.

Kimball's fourth novel is the darkly comic and fully realized fictional memoir of Daniel Carrier, a writer who has been haunted for years by the death of his father, Ray. Amid his violent tendencies, love of gambling and collection of Coke memorabilia, Ray was not only larger than life—he was just plain large. Weighing around 500 pounds when he died, Ray left Daniel with shameful memories of his parents fighting and divorcing, of Ray devouring potato chips and fast food. As a child, Daniel believed Ray was "the biggest man in the whole world" until he saw Andre the Giant on TV: "He could pick men up who were the size of my father.... After that, every time I looked at my father I felt kind of disappointed." Every page is soaked with Daniel's disenchantment: Ray's desperate search for his wife after she leaves, his fits of anger, his lingering scent and the furniture that broke under his weight.

But for all of Ray's girth, the novel is anything but hefty. Rather, Ray is examined through hundreds of vignettes: memories, photographs, fat dad jokes and dead dad jokes. Together, the fragments form a surprisingly enthralling portrait of an abusive father who surrendered to self-loathing and a son's struggle to forget him. Finally, Daniel exposes Ray's darkest secret, an act so grotesque as to eclipse his obesity. Delivered with irreverent sincerity, Daniel's tale is nothing if unsentimental. "The more I think about my father, the more I think about myself," he confesses. What results is a spellbinding and unflinching meditation on forgiveness, a novel that secures Kimball's reputation as a literary innovator. —Jonathan Fullmer