

Montreal shorties have ups and downs

BLACK TULIPS

By Claire Rothman
Oberon Press, 123 Pages, \$14.95

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Each of the 10 stories in this collection, all about 10 pages long, address the small moments of affection or awkwardness or desire that inform our days. Rothman, who lives in Montreal and has worked as a journalist, translator and teacher, at times matches words to the sentiment and the stories have understated wisdom enough to rumble around in the reader's imagination. At other times, the language is pedestrian or clichéd, and the stories and their attempts at quotidian insight fall flat.

Past Lives, a gentle story about searching for enlightenment; *Father of the Bride*, in which a man attempts to cope with the jumbled mix of emotions brought on by his youngest child's marriage; and *The Acupuncturist*, about sharing painful thoughts and memories, are among the strongest. They slowly build to a fleeting and personal moment of concern or wonder or shock.

In most of the other stories, there is clunkiness of language or emotion that gets in the way of an otherwise fine story. Rothman wants nature to mimic her characters' troubles, as when she gives us tulips that "tossed their heads with disdain," or an "imperfect moon" that "stared back unforgivingly," or "fingers of mist [that] reached up longingly from the water." At other times, she should have deleted such wayward phrases as "no great shakes," "to say the least" and "taken her sweet time." A closer editorial hand could have sharpened and focused the writing.

All of the stories, even those set in Berlin or Cracow, or which allude to Joyce's Dublin, are informed by Montreal, described at various times as "beaten-down" or "going to the dogs." It would be interesting to see Rothman break out of her 10-page format, dispense with the clichés and wrestle a little more passionately with the linguistic, political and emotional complications of the city itself.



Born in New York, Peter O'Brien has lived in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto. He co-edited, with Hugh Hood, Fatal Recurrences: New Fiction in English from Montreal.

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