Keeping the real world at arm’s length
Characters in Goran’s short stories take refuge in fantasies

Outlaws of the Purple Cow. Lester Goran. Kent State. 358 pages. $35.

BY PAULA FRIEDMAN

Coral Gables novelist Lester Goran conjures with humor and poignancy the sometimes wild aspirations of Irish Americans living in Pittsburgh in his new collection of short stories. In Jenny and the Episcopalian, his opening story, Goran creates a vividly moving portrait of a young woman living with her mother whose loneliness leads her to experience an imaginary, or at least supernatural, love affair with a ghost. Since childhood, Jenny had been told that she was “queer, harmless, and hopeless,” designations that seem not to trouble her much since “she thought herself very normal.”

In this and other stories, including Keeping Count, The Chorus Girl and The Inheritance, Goran shows the power that seemingly ordinary desire has to create strangely insulated worlds for his characters, ones in which they seek refuge as they attempt to keep bald reality at bay. The inevitable intrusion of the external world on personal life serves as one of Goran’s central and most intriguing themes.

In Adventurer, O’Casey and the Career and other stories, Goran dovetails the arrival of dramatic and personal life changes with major world events, including World War II and the Korean War. His central character Ramrod in Adventurer, depicts a young man, sickly and over-indulged throughout his youth, who attempts to settle down in marriage“two weeks after the war officially ended in Europe.”

Ramrod “took it all as somehow connected, leaving behind his carefree youth with a good marriage, the joys of friendships, and being an adventurer in Pittsburgh during World War II.” Yet, as Goran suggests, despite the pivotal nature of such events, many of his characters are unable to awaken from their fantasy lives. Ramrod himself continues his wartime womanizing and ultimately faces its drastic consequences.

Lester Goran uses humor, irony to explore imagination.

Goran also explores the dark cavities of the human soul — often revealed only too late to others — in one of his less comic pieces, The Priest of Storms. Joe Tapir, the anti-hero, had come to the United States in 1956 after the Hungarian Revolution. Welcomed in Pittsburgh, Tapir was given a job and soon began dating. Assuming that he and Alice will marry, the couple’s friends are baffled when Joe inexplicably disappears. Later, when he resurfaces and commits a grisly crime, the friends uncomfortably acknowledge that “no one ever really does know anyone else.”

And this is the crux in many of Goran’s stories: people get caught in the fantasy worlds of others as well as in their own. Mathew, one of the characters in The Prince of Storms, says it most precisely in his admonishment to a stranger: “Listen,” he said — “you have to be careful. You have to be real careful. Even though it might not do any good at all you still have to be careful.”

With affectionate humor and sometimes incisive irony, Goran presents wildly varied characters who share in Outlaws of the Purple Cow a fervent desire to transcend their ordinary lives with extraordinary visions.

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