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The Secret of Cartwheels
Patricia Henley

St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992.
$11.00; paper.
Reviewed by Kate Gadbow

With *The Secret of Cartwheels*, a new collection from Graywolf Press, Patricia Henley comes into her own as a storyteller. Mature, heartfelt and heartbreaking, these stories resonate, thanks to Henley's accurate take on human confusion and her unfailing attention to detail.

Even peripheral characters come alive through details—like the old neighbor down the road in the childhood story "Cargo": "Growing up the way we did, not knowing from one day to the next what to expect at home, we learned to get what we needed—attention or sameness—from our neighbors. Mrs. Higginbottom played her 78 RPM records for me, those heavy ones: 'Pistol-packin' Mama.' 'The Old Lamplighter.' She sat smoking Lucky Strikes in an overstuffed chair whose nap had long been slicked down. The smell in her house was an accretion of sweat, old paperbacks, wet dog, and chicken feed."

This attention to detail characterizes Henley's first book of stories, *Friday Night at Silver Star*, also from Graywolf and winner of the 1985 Montana Arts Council First Book Award. But that collection seems to me to rely more on unusual situations than on depth of character: swingers at a Montana hot springs in the title story; commune life where women with names like Sunbow garden barebreasted; ambiguous sexual arrangements. In her new book, Henley continues to chart the lives of marginal characters, but with a deeper exploration into the psyche, and with greater sympathy.

I have to admit I approached Henley's work with a certain prejudice. As a native Montanan seeing more and more people come from elsewhere and, for a variety of reasons, claim the region's psychic and physical landscape as their own, I was a bit suspicious on read-

ing the book jacket and press releases—maybe defensive is a better word. The blurbs and bio place a great deal of emphasis on Henley's connection with and authority on the American West (in capital letters).

After reading the book, however, I decided this emphasis was more a gambit on the part of Henley's publisher—an attempt to hook readers because the American West is enjoying an unprecedented chic right now—than any contrivance on Henley's part. Although she grew up in Maryland and Indiana and now teaches at Purdue, Henley *has* spent a good portion of her adult life in the West and most of her stories do take place in various western locations from the Washington apple orchards to northern California, to western Canada, to Bozeman, Montana. Yet the story I find strongest in the collection, "Labrador," is set entirely in the Midwest, Henley's home ground. In any case, her concerns seem to me less geographical than generational.

The Secret of Cartwheels is an accurate, moving, composite portrait of a portion of the generation that came of age in the sixties. Her characters don't become mainstream yuppies but remain on the margins, often by choice, sometimes by hard luck and circumstances beyond their control. In "Aces" a not-so-young narrator finds herself living in a garage, out of hope after her boyfriend is busted for manufacturing speed: "We'd given up on getting anywhere, having credit cards, owning anything besides our pickup and chain saw. We wanted to survive with as few hassles as possible. Sometimes I try to remember when it was that I ran out of aces. I think it happened a long time ago, in Santa Cruz, and I just realized it when we were busted." In "Deep Creek" the male narrator who's finally found what he hopes is a good life realizes his wife is of another mind: "That's the key, giving up wanting more. Living what is instead of bemoaning what isn't. I thought we should stick it out—focus on the positive, the view of glaciated peaks outside our kitchen window,

the good salary I earned, my first-ever decent salary, the summer free—and Kath thought we should leave at the end of the school year." These people have difficulty sustaining relationships; they long for love, for connection, in a world that has turned its back on the idealism that enticed them to step out of the mainstream in the first place.

In this book, more than in her first, Henley moves back in time, to the 50s Catholic childhood that so many of those later idealists seemed to share. And it's these childhood stories I find the strongest, the most affecting of the entire collection. Each of them is an unsentimental, clear-eyed evocation of the adolescent and pre-adolescent psyche and its take on family pain.

While settings, names, and circumstances vary, we're given essentially the same childhood in "Cargo," "Labrador," and "The Secret of Cartwheels": the father is absent or nearly; the mother is alcoholic and unstable; the children are numerous, closely-spaced and closely knit; the narrator sees herself as an adolescent forced too early into adult responsibility and bitter awareness. An adult narrator's voice weaves its way through these three stories, trying to make sense of the past in a way that sometimes strikes the reader as forced and preachy, but most often works well to chart the longings, confusion and deep love that make up the marred fabric of a failing family. The final passage of the title story illustrates these conflicted feelings with a delicate accuracy that leaves the reader breathless, devastated:

"I didn't want to forgive her for being the way she was, but you have to forgive your mother. She searched my eyes and tried to make some long-ago connection, sweet scrutiny, perhaps the way she'd looked at me when I was a new baby, her first baby. I looked away. Jan Mary gnawed delicately at her cuticles. Christopher came around the corner of the house swinging his Mickey Mantle bat, his leather mitt looped on his belt. The new spring leaves were so bright they hurt my eyes."