



Escape Artists

Provincetown is a place of refuge and reckoning in Randi Triant's third novel

Health and disability issues, LGBTQ characters and Provincetown are among the recurring themes in Randi Triant's fiction. She expands and deepens those concerns in her ambitious third novel, "What We Give, What We Take," an unconventional mother-son saga that spans the 1960s to the 1990s.

Triant, who lives in Provincetown, opens from the point of view of Dickie, a teenager in the 1960s who struggles with a polio-inflicted disability and a difficult life with his mother, Fay Stonewell, a water-tank escape artist now living in Florida. Seeking escape from her oppressive life, Fay joins a carnival headed to Vietnam to entertain the troops, leaving

Dickie behind with her abusive boyfriend. The second part of the story is Fay's, set in Vietnam as she faces the trauma of war and the realization that she's traumatized her own child. The novel's third section finds Dickie living in Provincetown in the 1990s with Spin, a friend with AIDS, and grappling with his past as it resurfaces.

"What We Give, What We Take," out in April from She Writes Press, is Triant's third novel, but it began as her first. "I started it as a short story in grad school 20 years ago and it was about Dickie," she says. "It was part of my thesis and one of my advisors, Maria Flook, who is a writer, said to me, 'The kid is good but what about that mother? How could she leave him and

go to Vietnam?' I thought, yes, it's a novel, not a short story, and I should tell Fay's story, too."

At the time, Triant was working in communications and media for a large public health research firm in Boston which included making documentaries. But she still found time to write as well as earn her MFA in writing and literature from Bennington College in 2001. Her debut novel, "The Treehouse," was included in the website AfterEllen's "Your Ultimate Gay Girl Summer Reading List" in 2018. Her follow-up was a suspense novel, "A New Life," about a woman whose investigation of her estranged sister's death leads her to Provincetown. Over the years, Triant struggled to complete "What We Give, What We Take."

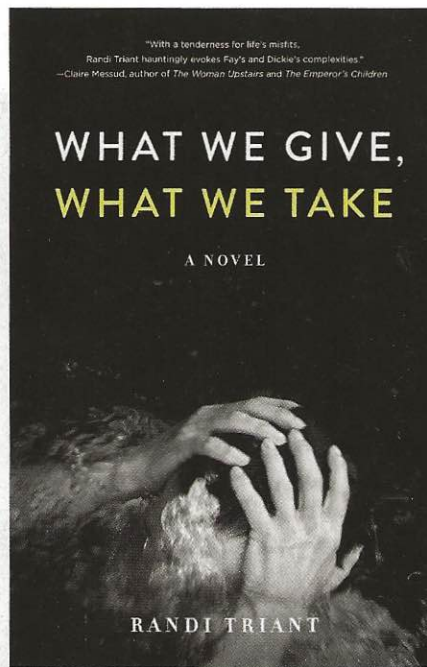
"I knew I had to do research on Vietnam... I had written about AIDS, and characters with AIDS were always foremost in my mind. I wanted the character of

Spin to be the hero of the story. So it had to become a bigger project which took 10 years. I kept revising it then throwing it back in my drawer.”

Triant says it was when her wife, artist Fiona Sinclair, read the unfinished manuscript and asked, “What is it doing in a drawer?” that gave Triant the push to finish it and send it to her publisher.

Taking Flook’s early advice, Triant explored Fay’s hardscrabble life and a series of very bad choices. The middle section of the novel vividly portrays her working as a carny in Vietnam where, surrounded by destruction and danger, she uses all her wiles to escape.

“I grew up during the Vietnam war; seeing it on TV news as a kid stuck with me. All wars are bad for children, but Vietnam was horrible for kids. I wanted it to parallel the violence that Dickie goes through,” says Triant. “Fay thinks she’s escaping and sensibly raising money for Dickie’s treatment, but again she realizes she’s made another mistake and now has to get home. I wanted to show the parallels of Fay seeing violence against kids and the violence against her own child.”



Since themes of escape recur in the novel, it makes sense that Provincetown emerges as a refuge. “I wanted Dickie to end up there because it’s easy to hide in and have a new life, a new persona,” she says. “I wanted him to meet someone with AIDS who’d be an outcast, but for me

Spin is the hero. He gives Dickie what he’s needed his whole life.”

Triant finished the last section just as she was moving to Provincetown five years ago. “I always wanted to retire early and be able to write,” she says. Triant had been visiting the town regularly for 30 years and drew on her experiences in the 1990s and her friendship with James Assatley, who died of AIDS in 1993. The early 1990s also serves as the time frame for her next novel, which she describes as being about two young women now estranged but who were close as kids. One has HIV, and the women reunite for a journey to seek treatment options.

Provincetown as a place of escape and safety is something Triant understood from her first visit with friends in the mid-’80s. “I’ll never forget driving down Commercial Street. I was living in Albany, New York; we’d just arrived, the street was packed at midnight, and I remember being just stunned by the drag queens, the whole ambiance; it was full of life,” she says. “I thought it was a miracle.” [x]

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