

A Review of Ruff Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Ruff Thorpe's first novel, [The Girls from Corona del Mar](#) (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she's a junkie now, to Mia's shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she's raving a little—and she demands, "Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?"

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it's an important one to Ruff Thorpe's writing. The question—"who deserves anything?"—permeates all three of her books, which also include [Dear Fang, With Love](#) (2016) and [The Knockout Queen](#) (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?— or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smearred fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She's seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

*

In Thorpe's most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen*, our narrator's name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.

Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, "an

effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort...who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him." Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

*

Across her three novels, Ruffalo's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality "almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion."

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Ruffalo's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do, the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there's also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that's capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could

almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you'd have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.



Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can't believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. "On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions," Michael describes.

Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its

place.

*

Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-

effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

*

Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post-Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.

"As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years," he later thinks, "Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and

happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman.”

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael’s eyes:

Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a “nymphet,” but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael’s voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and “performing prettiness” in the same breath as “extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine” and “fuck.” Her mention of that “heterosexual male author” with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny’s dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It’s equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov’s middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend’s life before he knew her, before her mother died, before her whole world changed.

I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother’s death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I

imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?

"Thank you for showing these to me," I said.

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny's mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered "suicide." Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There's a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, "in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess"). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White*

Album—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home's pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisaical California town. Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—so grave, so concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to have control — even if they can barely understand it — rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

*

Bunny and Michael decide to play at "realness." It's a term they've gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the

reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can “deconstruct” femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know, at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

One of the terms we stole from RuPaul’s Drag Race was the concept of “realness.” They would say, “Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now,” and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that’s maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn’t just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act—trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

To tell the truth by lying. What is “realness,” then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe's chosen locale, to "[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice." Ray laughs to Michael, "No one was born in North Shore!" There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were not. Isn't that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

*

At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann's slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying "embrace the suck," and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann's husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael's dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe's second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family's Holocaust-razed past and his daughter's newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.

America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no

such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter's hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Ruffi. [The Knockout Queen](#). A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen is [now available](#) anywhere books are sold.