

Popular fiction roundup

# Ties that bind

An outstanding debut is a heartbreaking, timely reminder of the tyranny of slavery in the Deep South.

by GILL SOUTH

Robert Jones Jr's **THE PROPHETS** (Riverrun, \$37.99) is the tale of a group of slaves at the Empty plantation in the American South, their lives ruthlessly controlled by the Halifax family and a trigger-happy clan of overseers.

Treating his slaves like animals or worse, the head of the family, Massa Paul, clinically aims to breed a stronger workforce for the future, so he builds up the black male slaves with hard labour, then sends them to impregnate the women, as he would a bull to a herd of cows.

His plan suffers a hitch when it becomes

apparent that the two young men he has groomed, Isaiah and Samuel, who have grown up together on the plantation, are lovers, and have no interest in impregnating the young women. This puts them in terrible jeopardy.

In this deeply moving novel, Jones asks readers to bear witness to the litany of ways American slaves were treated during this terrible time in history. Their names were taken away when they were very young and forever withheld. The women had their babies removed without any explanation, or were allowed to keep the ones born of rape. No one was left unscathed.

Some find a way to fight back. Maggie, the head housekeeper, uses herbs and potions to make her mistress, master and their children sick.

Although most like to keep the family at arm's length, one slave, Amos, decides to learn about the god that the Halifaxes worship and becomes more adept at preaching than the master.

Jones weaves in lyricism and ghostly presences to tell his story, going back in history to the African villages the young and healthy were taken from. This is a heartbreaking, important novel written with devastating clarity and colour, and you can almost taste the sweat and blood of these characters.

At the same time, there's extraordinary bravery and remarkable love in this beleaguered community simply trying to survive. It's a stark reminder of the



Clockwise from far left: Robert Jones Jr; Janet Skeslien Charles; Zaina Arafat.

Fast-forward to 1983 Montana and Odile is a widowed war bride whose American husband died a few years ago. She and motherless Lily, a bright teen next door, forge a friendship through their love of French, each leaning on the other to get through testing times.

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Lily is the most appealing of the characters. She's at a crucial time in her life – to either meet her potential and escape her conservative town or to become a drudge for her family. Odile is, it has to be said, at times a little wooden by comparison. Paris in wartime is a well-trodden setting in novels, but the story of the American Library is an interesting one and a tale worth telling.

The protagonist of Zaina Arafat's **YOU EXIST TOO MUCH** (Little Brown, \$34.99) is a hot mess when we meet her. The young Palestinian American (whose

name we never know) has spent every summer in the Middle East with her family and has always felt on the outside, both in her parents' country of Jordan and in the US, where she lives and studies. Coming to terms with her sexuality, she navigates a series of disastrous personal relationships with both men and women.

Though her relationship with her mother is toxic, she's always trying to please the woman who has repeatedly told her she is average. As she wrestles with her identities – cultural, religious and sexual – this young queer woman, a recovering anorexic, spends time in a clinic and finally makes some progress.

The Palestinian-American author describes a world she knows well and it's an intriguing one. The protagonist says being a lesbian in her culture is shameful – it shows a lack of reverence for the male-centric orthodoxy. Arafat describes this young woman's journey with empathy, but it's hard for the reader to maintain patience throughout. Still, a thought-provoking read. ■



Best recent poetry

# Reality checks

Humour and nature inhabit three new poetry collections.

by NICHOLAS REID

Victor Billot's **THE SETS** (Otago University Press, \$27.50), gives a savage view of the world. It begins and ends with the wild sea, beautiful but untameable,

providing his most consistent chain of imagery. Nature isn't an easy context for humans. The first cycle of poems focuses on melancholy and loss. Love is a "sharp claw" that hurts us. Relationships fall apart. The poem *Litany* suggests self-loathing. But there's a lifebelt of humour in the second cycle of poems. Billot goes satirical, kicking at complacency about climate change, glib neoliberalism and modish techno-speak. As for "inspirational" schlock, if you don't fall about laughing at Billot's *Alternative Book Titles For an Imaginary Airport Bookstore*, then you have a very impaired



Enlightened: Janis Freegard.

sense of humour. He does find a place for innocent childhood memory, but it's always a prelude to comments on later ecological depredation. This is a tough and challenging collection with a firm grasp of style. A must.

Totally different in tone is Janis Freegard's **READING THE SIGNS** (The Cuba Press, \$25), a book of prose-poems presenting a gentle and essentially pacifistic view of life.

In a writer's residence in Wairarapa, Freegard learns to read tea leaves. From her reading emerges a

kind of guru called The Interpreter who enlightens her, engages her in conversation and makes her more aware of the environment she moves in. The view

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of nature is benign as birds and trees are observed and admired. An almost Buddhist idea of the connectedness of all things develops. But there's a flaw in this Eden. The Interpreter frequently produces lists of animals that have recently become extinct and glaciers that

are melting away. From her own angle, Freegard is as concerned about climate change as Billot is. She is also concerned with "gender fluidity" as The Interpreter lectures her on mites and insects that are either hermaphroditic or can change from one sex to another. Does this all fit together? Oddly enough, it does. Arcadia cohabits with hard reality.

As satisfying as his preferred steak and a good red wine is Kevin Ireland's **SHAPE OF THE HEART** (Quentin Wilson Publishing, \$24.99). No beating about the bush here. The octogenarian poet's 46th collection of poetry is an old man's book with hints that it may be Ireland's last. But his powers of observation are undimmed. We get the same

sharp, blockish, ironical, no-nonsense voice that we've heard in so many of his earlier works. So, on come memories of old mates, learning to sleep in without guilt, sly warnings to young hotshots, and always an unsentimental awareness that time is moving on and the Reaper isn't far off. Old age is a bugger, with falls, pains in the feet and heart trouble, but there are sunrises to admire, good memories and a stoical acceptance of foul weather. Good stuff and as familiar as household words. ■

