Book Review

# *The Mare* by Mary Gaitskill: Attention to social inequality—in her own way

**Sandy English**
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*The Mare* by Mary Gaitskill, New York: Pantheon, 2015, 464 pp.

Mary Gaitskill, born 1954, is a prominent American novelist and short story writer. In addition to *The Mare*, the subject of this review, she has authored three collections of short stories (*Bad Behavior*, *Because They Wanted To* and *Don't Cry*) and two novels (*Two Girls, Fat and Thin* and *Veronica*).

In *The Mare*, Gaitskill focuses on a poor Dominican teenager from New York City, the suburban family she lives with during the summer and her experiences relating to an abused horse.

With her first collection of stories, *Bad Behavior*, published in 1988, Gaitskill became known for "transgressive" fiction, because of her exploration of topics such as sadomasochism, prostitution and the emotional and physical abuse of children. One of the stories, "Secretary," about a lawyer and the unhappy, stifled young woman he hires and—with her complicity—degrades, was made into a film directed by Steven Shainberg, featuring Maggie Gyllenhaal and James Spader. Gaitskill was critical of the movie, observing that it was "heavy on the charm (and a little too nice)."

Gaitskill's attitude toward taboo subjects tends to be thoughtful and unconventional. She treats them as complex phenomena, the results of conditions that young people confront and endure. One comes away from reading her various works with an inclination to resist quick judgments and look a little more closely, and sympathetically, at how people behave toward one another in intimate circumstances—and why.

Nor is there a facile form of gender politics at work here. When one admiring female critic observed that "I hate it when men talk about Mary Gaitskill" and urged "a permanent moratorium" on men "discoursing" on the novelist's work, Gaitskill responded that "in truth some of my best support has come from men" and expressed the hope that there would not "be a 'moratorium' on men speaking of my work or anything else."

She is an honest and intriguing writer. The portrait she paints of life in America is not a pretty one. The characters in her fiction are nearly always sad, downcast or at sea, and there is an element of loneliness that is more acute than in almost any other recent body of American fiction. ("Everybody has their sadness," she writes in *Bad Behavior*, "And most people are scared of it.") Nevertheless, people often survive and learn something, although the atmosphere she creates tends to be dark and, at times, too unrelenting.

The characters in *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991), her first novel, are two young women brought together through a cult based on an Ayn Rand-like figure. Her characters exist at the margins of more typical middle-class life—rejecting it, but never free of it—and look to resolve their problems by unusual sex and exertion of individual will power. The novel strikes one as a product of a genuine nonconformism, with an element of satire.

Her characters' "sense of self," and how they navigate somewhat brokenly through the world, is obviously a deep concern to Gaitskill. It is also a mark of the fiction of the three decades from the 1980s onward, which concentrated heavily on matters of identity and personality. The fiction of the period, on the whole, failed to connect the self-disparagement and personal failures typical of so many of its characters with the broader circumstances of the Reagan-Bush-Clinton era. The increasing economic inequality in American society found expression in a malignant triumphalism of those "on top," and, unhappily, the growing conviction of many others that they were "losers." This was not well understood or registered by American novelists and other artists.

Gaitskill has some insight into the fact that life's conditions, at least the immediate conditions of family and upbringing, generate some of the extreme and troubling attitudes of her characters. When asked by an interviewer about the sadomasochism of one of the women in *Two Girls , Fat and Thin*, she replied, "It seems like self-contempt, but it's really an inverted contempt for everything. That's what I was trying to describe in her. I would say it had to do with her childhood, not because she was sexually abused, but because the world that she was presented with was so inadequate in terms of giving her a full-spirited sense of herself."

What Gaitskill does not address, however, is why life was so inadequate to begin with. Her stories are full of grim landscapes in Michigan and New Jersey. But a good deal more needs to be said about all that.

In the end, the biggest problem with her work is not the presence of individual artistic failings, which may or may not exist, but the manner in which the past 30 years has weighed down on cultural life as a whole. Gaitskill has no doubt aspired to be independent of—or even oppose—the reactionary official atmosphere that has prevailed and the varieties of crude middle-class public opinion. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to get away from those things.

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Certain kinds of efforts (through sexuality and extreme nonconformity) to evade the general decline and intellectual poverty may themselves prove to be expressions of some of the dreadfulness, rather than a rejection of it. In Gaitskill's case, perhaps they are both.

In her more recent work Gaitskill has offered sometimes startling images of the last, difficult period. In *Veronica* (2005), a poor, ill, middle-aged woman narrates the story of her youth in the 1980s as a model and her friendship with a quirky, but genuine and open woman named Veronica, who eventually dies of AIDS.

The reader feels as he or she passes though the decades represented in the book that the "beauty industry" of the time reflected something essentially trivial, false and nasty about life in America. The sensitive people die off or wither away. The aggressive and selfish flourish. Beauty is made repulsive and repulsiveness is turned into beauty. The novel is narrated in figurative and often revealing language ("A living sea of pigeons boiled and ate bread at our feet") and Gaitskill's narrator often strikes an ironic and satirical tone: "Now everyone knows that models are important and everyone knows exactly what beauty is." The book is widely considered her best work.

In the ten years since *Veronica* was published, Gaitskill has been sensitive to some of the important issues of our day: war and social inequality. In "The Arms and Legs of the Lake" in her 2009 collection, *Don' t Cry*, a group of people on a train—including Iraq veterans, veterans of other wars and antiwar protesters—talk and eavesdrop on one another and think about the Iraq conflict. They discuss the reactions of the Iraqis to the invasion. Overall, the complexity of the doubts about and hostility toward the war within the American population, including the soldiers, comes across.

Attention to social inequality expresses itself most directly in her new novel, *The Mare*, though with mixed results. It concerns a poor 12-year-old Dominican girl, Velvet, from Brooklyn who stays with a summer host family in affluent suburbs in Westchester County, north of New York City. At home, she is verbally and sometimes physically abused by her mother. Her suburban hosts are a middle-aged couple, Paul, a professor, and Ginger, an occasional painter. They belong roughly to the upper middle class, and they are surrounded by wealthier neighbors. The novel is narrated in the first person by several of the characters, but mostly by Ginger and Velvet.

Gaitskill is often capable of making the reader see everyday things in a sharp, new light. In a few words, for example, she sketches a major transportation hub in New York City on a weekend: "Outside the Port Authority were dirty homeless people sleeping against the walls; inside, mostly closed stores and hardly anyone but police and ugly music playing."

Sometimes Velvet's naïveté is striking in the face of New York's harsh realities: "A little while later a cop killed him for nothing and his name got put up on a wall."

Velvet is bullied at school and at home (a common motif in Gaitskill's fiction). She experiences the death of friends and the kindness of neighbors. On the whole, her life is bleak and her mother constantly struggles to pay the bills.

In spite of a superb ear for the language that Velvet and her peers speak, the social environment in Crown Heights, a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn, feels caricatured. It is too cold and friendless, and neither Velvet nor her mother has formed any enduring relationships at work or in the neighborhood. They have no other family and do not seek out Dominican cultural life in the city. This strikes one as unconvincing.

The suburban world is better drawn. Ginger seems like a more individualized character with a history as a drug addict and as an artist in lower Manhattan. At times she seems incredibly distant from anything that Velvet experiences, perhaps more than we might expect from a recovered drug addict who lived in New York in the 1980s.

The novel turns on the relationship that Velvet has with an abused horse, Fugly Girl, at the nearby riding school that Ginger enrolls her in. Velvet's identification with and feelings for the animal create some of the most moving moments in the book. "She saw what I was doing; she let me. I sat on her and swung my hair behind me. The sky was huge and bright but it was touching me now, it was friendly, and the huge brightness of the grass stretched before me."

Velvet strikes up relationships with some of the staff at the school, who are often presented as real people with their own joys and difficulties. The younger people from the wealthier families are not drawn like monsters, but the class tensions invariably seep in.

To her credit, Gaitskill does not take a race-based view of inequality. Velvet herself sees race and inequality as synonymous, but this rings true for a person of her age and background in New York. She also encounters patronizing and racist attitudes from people in Westchester and some of those who run the summer program. But other characters observe more than once that there are poor white people and that the differences are primarily economic.

The novel ends happily and that may strike a false note, in the face of the difficulties the novel has touched upon.

On the whole, one feels that Gaitskill is making a genuine attempt to explore the question of inequality. She does so in her own fashion and out of her own artistic history, which means treating the pressing social issue as a matter of personal encounters and individual responses, not something that is destabilizing American society and threatening to set in motion millions of people. Of course, people from different social classes interact, but those interactions may simply be accidental or arbitrary unless they are filled with historical content. In *The Mare*, they are not for the most part.

As is typical for the author, the maladies produced by people's backgrounds are brought into close contact. But that is where the problem lies and where the book fails to fully convince. Poverty is a malady, but belonging to the working class is not.

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