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Stray (review)

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forced by a loss to start anew. As Mary's husband, Dylan, says to her, "Without Stella, it's hard to remember who we are." Hood shows us how Mary starts over—though she does so just barely, and only through the friendship of her knitting circle.

As so many writers have recently shown, the emotion of deep loss is enormously compelling when translated into art. Yet it is difficult to write about one's own personal grief while still maintaining the necessary distance to craft a piece of art. Though her novel lacks the toughness, independence and imagination that characterize her short stories, Hood has done remarkably well in distancing her experience from *The Knitting Circle*, allowing her personal story to become the stories of others. (LH)



## Stray

By Sheri Joseph

MacAdam/Cage, 2007, 444 pp., \$25

Sheri Joseph's debut novel, *Stray*, is a fearless examination of the myriad deeds and relationships love inhabits—from charitable acts of kindness, to marriage, to sexual liaisons so unlikely that they appear to make no sense.

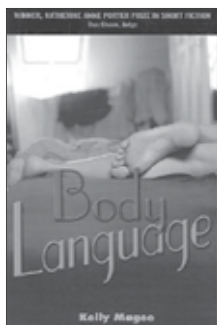
A lover's triangle of two men and a woman would usually be thought to consist of a wife cheating on her husband, a woman with two lovers. In *Stray*, it's the husband who has two lovers—one his wife and the other his boyfriend. The husband is a thirty-year-old musician just beginning to settle into married life. His wife, Maggie, is a Mennonite lawyer of unshakable faith in her place in the world, and the lover is a college student surviving on the tired kindness of an ailing professor. It is more than the seductive storyline that drives this novel, though; it is the unrelenting mess created when good intentions overlap again and again with unavoidable physical entanglement.

Joseph's first book, *Bear Me Safely Over*, is a cycle of stories that features two of the characters from *Stray*, Kent and Paul, and describes the awkward genesis of their relationship. Love and how it blends and mutes the boundaries between straight and gay are themes of both books. In *Stray*, however, there are few traces of previous characters' homophobia; rather, what occurs is a manifestation of genuine compassion through the portrayal of modern-day Mennonites and the quiet tolerance evident in daily private acts of kindness and pacifism.

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Joseph is able to render authentic moments of spiritual reflection, rambling, self-loathing tirades, and the fear inherent in self-deception just as easily as intimate moments between lovers, whether they're gay, straight, young and virile or old and dying. Throughout the novel, characters are unable to commit to their choices or to believe that the world they've created through their decisions is the same as the one they currently inhabit. "This comes from wanting the wrong things," Kent tells himself after a murder has led Paul to seek refuge—at Maggie's urging—in the couple's home. "Too much of him had wanted Paul asleep in the house, and now it had come." Kent loves his wife, but he has been unable to stop imagining his lover being part of his married life. Later, after Maggie has become Paul's lawyer, she brings him to the graveside of the murder victim. "The sun's slanted beam may have caused the heat and flush in her face," but she kisses his hair, and his response is to kiss "her neck, a soft, searching brush of lips that lingered enough to suggest possibility, not much, only an unhardened question in her mind. . . ." She loves Kent, her husband, but is attracted to this third person, Paul, knowing the boy is gay but not that he is her husband's lover.

In *Stray*, Joseph exposes the layering of friendship, love and devotion through her subject matter and characters and makes an unflinching assertion that relationships aren't discrete but rather messy and often slightly beyond our control. (LK)



## Body Language

By Kelly Magee

University of North Texas Press, 2006, 197 pp., \$12.95

The stories in Kelly Magee's debut collection explore the compass of female sexuality, including among their protagonists Em, a half-Cuban lesbian in South Tampa; Gyp, a queer-identified woman in love with a MTF transvestite; Lucha, a ten-year-old migrant worker, instructed in kissing by an older girl; and Dana, a thirty-something actress who expects her good looks to get her places with the male executives of Orlando's nascent film community. Set mainly in Ohio and the Deep South, these eleven stories depict characters who are often stifled, either by their circumstances or by their own temperaments. When they finally act on their desires, they do so wildly, amid terrains whose racial and class complexities Magee renders skillfully.