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## Chapters And Verse

### Comfort Food

There is nothing as comforting as a sense of home. Sometimes a song playing on the radio will trigger one of those déjà vu moments. Sometimes a smell conjures up the same sense of familiarity. And now and then you open the pages of a book and out springs an offhand comment or a subtle reference that instantly transports you back in time and experience. It's an onomatopoeic moment, if there is such a thing.

Such is the case with a lovely little new book called *The World Of Pies* by Karen Stolz. It's set in small town America but with the exception of the door to door mail delivery, it feels like any fifties home. Stolz dedicates the book to her Mom and Dad who gave her the gifts of a "small town childhood and their love of words."

The main character, Roxanne, is 12 years old as the summer of 1961 arrives in Annette, Texas. As the story unfolds, we watch how values are instilled. Mom insists on letting a black woman enter the pie making contest. Roxanne wrestles with defining love when her cousin Tommy comes home from Viet Nam minus a limb. And from time to time, Stolz hints at all the social changes brewing across America with characters like the first mail lady who is the object of Roxanne's intense curiosity and affection. There were questions about the mail lady's sexual orientation although such a phrase was not in use in 1961 and besides, crushes were almost gender neutral in those days. No, in 1961, it was the little blue bottles of Evening in Paris that represented exotica to an entire generation of young, pubescent girls. Filling out the foreground were accounts of first loves, first sexual encounters, deaths, births, fickle friendships and Roxanne's eventual return to ground zero of all that is sane in our lives - home sweet home.

The real bonuses were the recipes. Angel Food Cake, brownies, mouth watering Lemon Meringue Pie and Aunt Ruthie's Hot Fudge Sauce which is:

- 1 stick butter or margarine
- 2 squares unsweetened baking chocolate
- 1 ½ cups sugar

6 tbsp milk  
2 tbsp white corn syrup

Melt the butter and chocolate over low heat. Add the sugar, milk and corn syrup. Stir together and bring to a boil - boil for one minute. Let set for 2 minutes. Pour while still hot over vanilla ice cream. It should harden (not hard, more chewy) when it hits the cold ice cream. Warning: highly addictive.

Stolz's book reminded me to take a second look at the writing of Gail Anderson Dargaatz. I first met the prairie author when, at 34, she had just published her second novel and was about to move to B.C. with her farmer husband. The critics had already crowned her as "the next Margaret Laurence" for her first book, *The Cure For Death By Lightening* which was 42 weeks on the bestseller list; had been nominated for the prestigious Giller Prize and had won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. That said, I suggested that her books seemed filled with food, sex and emotion and she yelped "Look at me! I Love food! I Love Sex! I Love emotion!" Our conversation focused on relationships, both familial and romantic, and then turned to her fascination with what people believe and why. And, of course, there were remedies, cures, recipes.

*The Cure for Death By Lightening* (1996) is a sometimes brutal but beautifully constructed tale full of supernatural elements, folklore, magic and natural cures, and there really IS a recipe for the cure for death by lightning. Victims should be handled thus: Dunk the dead by lightning in a cold water bath for two hours and if still dead, add vinegar and soak for an hour more. The cure is found scribbled in the scrapbook belonging to the mother (a healer and terrific cook) of the main character. Young Beth comes of age while secretly leafing through the scrapbook, which is stuffed with yellowed clippings, mementos and recipes. There are instructions for making paper and beet wine and recipes for oatcakes, pancakes, raspberry buns, Christmas stew and barley sugar candy which is just brown sugar, water, lemon juice with a little luck for good measure. And the secret of a perfect daffodil sponge cake is also revealed: eggs - lots of eggs - perhaps a dozen or more.

Gail's second novel, *A Recipe For Bees*, has fewer actual recipes. There's nothing to suggest how to cook or eat them, but there is a method for actually creating bees: "Fill the carcass of a slaughtered bullock with a fragrant compost of herbs and wait." Her point, of course, is about relationships. "Because occasionally something fermented inside the lifeless carcass of a marriage, something began to stir, limbless at first, then with wings whirring, trying out the thin air, till suddenly, like rain from a summer cloud, it burst out with the force that drove old lovers to do things no one, not even they themselves, were capable of..."

When I asked if we should test the recipe for saving bees, she said: "Well, you could try but it's like my cure for death by lightning - I don't suggest it!"

World of Pies, Cure for Death By Lightning and Recipe For Bees are all set in small towns and focus on daughters and their mothers, relationships, and the all too shaky foundations of our beliefs and our sense of security. Each reflects their time with a bang-on portrayal of ordinary things and seemingly simple characters. These books truly are chicken soup for the soul.