

were added during the religious fervor of the early 19th century's Second Great Awakening. All of this expansion was accomplished despite a rule of strict celibacy; increasing their community required adding new converts.

The simplicity of this well-ordered communal life, which also included plain uniform attire, counterpointed their form of ecstatic worship. Mother Ann Lee laid down the precept of their industriousness, urging "hands to work and

examples of Shaker ladder-back chairs, their most acclaimed—and copied—design. An aesthetic of unadorned forms and basic colors governs their chairs and rockers. But close looking is encouraged; the back posts of one seemingly simple

the world of the Shakers, it is only a glimpse of the depth of feeling and commitment required by their faith.

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## FICTION CHRONICLE: SAM SACKS

# Into the Deep End



**YANNICK MURPHY** is always getting up to something new. She has written a trio of children's books, an adult novel in the

voice of a foul-mouthed New York teen and two decade-spanning historical dramas (including 2007's "Signed, Mata Hari," which takes the point of view of the notorious World War I spy). Then there's "The Call" (2012), the most ambitious of all, even though it takes place in the familiar environs of the author's home state of Vermont. Each chapter is set up like a veterinarian's evaluation form (the narrator is a rural vet), and from this seemingly ungainly Q&A framework Ms. Murphy extracts a family novel of amazing candor and sweetness.

An inventive, incantatory style transforms a potboiler plot into a strange and unsettling experience.

Ms. Murphy's "This Is the Water" (Harper Perennial, 340 pages, \$14.99), a domestic tale and unlikely crime thriller, adds a striking new wrinkle to the author's consistently surprising body of work. The book announces its stylistic gambit from its opening sentence: "This is the water, lapping the edge of the pool, coming up in small waves as children race through it." Many of the lines that follow begin with "This is," as if the story were an unfolding nursery rhyme.

Much of that story occurs at a New England pool, where parents dutifully bring their children for swim practice and meets. Ms. Murphy skims across the thoughts of the pool staff, the swimmers and the parents, but she settles most often on the character of Annie, a middle-aged mother of two

teen girls who has grown restive as her marriage to husband Thomas sinks into complacency. Annie is written as "you": "This is Thomas in bed lying next to you, patting your arm once before you fall asleep. Thomas has dispensed with the kissing." Annie notes that she can recognize the "timbre and tone" of the sound made when her husband swallows water, "the way a mother knows the sound of her own child's cry." Ms. Murphy excels at such intimate observations of everyday family life.

In "The Call" domestic routine is overturned by an act of accidental violence (the vet's son in shot by a hunter). In "This Is the Water," Ms. Murphy goes further by introducing a serial killer into the cast.

"Our killer"—he is identified for the reader immediately and often observed sitting in the stands at the swim meets—turns this novel into a pulse-raising thriller, especially in the second half, when his murders come to the forefront. But Ms. Murphy's writing gives the usual potboiler conventions a very strange effect. Her incantatory, repetitive "this is" sentences, her use of the second person and her habit of personification (she gives the pool water a mind and a voice) are all characteristics of children's books. In "This Is the Water" they create an unsettling sense of trespass, as though a psychopath had infiltrated the safest corner of your bookshelf.

Amy Bloom's "Lucky Us" (Random House, 240 pages, \$26) startles in a different way, with a fireworks display of delightful, if sometimes confounding, surprises. Quiet, bespectacled Eva Acton, who narrates much of the novel, is living with her glamorous older half-sister Iris in 1939 Ohio, when the pair decide to ditch their con-man father and go to Hollywood. There Iris signs a contract with MGM, but her career

ends when she's photographed canoodling with a starlet. The sisters, joined by a loyal makeup artist and their suddenly reappearing dad, reinvent themselves as the household staff for a wealthy family in Long Island.

There are no straight stretches in Ms. Bloom's wildly twisting plot. In



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New York, Iris becomes besotted with the cook, Irene, and rats out her unfortunate (and innocent) husband as a German sympathizer, getting him sent to an internment camp. The girls' father starts a love affair with an African-American jazz singer and then falls severely ill. They all, for their own reasons, conspire to steal a child from an orphanage.

At times it feels as if Ms. Bloom's writing is laboring to keep up with the pace of her whimsy. But loyal, likable Eva holds the book together, just as

she does her impulsive family. When her father quotes Oscar Wilde to her to explain the Acton tendency to go crazy over females—"Women are meant to be loved, not understood"—Eva thinks: "It seemed to me that I was going to be a woman too and I would like it if someone thought they should understand me." Finding that someone turns out to be the last loop-de-loop of this spryly spontaneous book.

The comfort of the expected and the deeply familiar is the attraction for Eliza Poinsett, the heroine of Margaret Bradham Thornton's refined romance "Charleston" (Ecco, 320 pages, \$25.99). In 1990, after 10 years studying art history in London, Eliza returns to the South Carolina city where she was raised and to a society in which "where you were from rated more than where you were going." There she renews a courtship with her charming, and exceptionally patient, old flame Henry Heyward.

As Henry takes her to their old haunts, the seductions of her hometown—"sun, smell of pluff mud, sound of the tide going out"—cast their spell. "The past was a kind of weather that pushed in from the harbor and lingered long," Ms. Thornton writes with characteristic elegance and restraint. The bittersweet love story that follows is predictable down to the debutante ball where Eliza and Henry dance the foxtrot. (Among other Southern-novel staples included here are, unfortunately, some old African-American men who dispense folksy wisdom.) But what Eliza thinks of Charleston is true of the novel: "There was something soothing about coming to a place where there was nothing new to see, where everything was known, where there were only confirmations and never any questions."