



How to conceive of a girl: Spencer writes about colour women, and how to make fairy wings.

The Age, Saturday 9th November 1996 p 9

EXTRA

THE AGE SATURDAY 9 NOVEMBER 1996

9

Portraits of feminism

DURING the past year, the media's selection of quotes from feminists who write theory or social commentary has tended to give the impression that the biggest issue for '90s feminism is the generation gap. So it's a relief to see that feminists who write fiction are continuing to work away steadily all round the world, achieving an unselfconscious diversity.

Take Gayla Reid, for example, born in Australia and now living in Canada. Reid defines herself as "for many years extremely active in the women's movement", so I was initially surprised to find that the stories in her first collection, *To Be There with You*, concentrate more on the peace movement and the Vietnam War.

But Reid's feminism is the kind that permeates, not proselytises. Her spare laconic stories are in the Hemingway/Carver line of decent, but she unobtrusively subverts that tradition, giving us the women who protest against war, the women who sleep with soldiers, the women who help deserters and draft resisters — and then writing from inside a soldier and a disabled veteran, in case we think she doesn't understand that side of the equation.

While Reid has chosen to reinterpret an established tradition, the voice in these stories is distinctively her own, juxtaposing event with event until the suppressed feeling wells up in a single distilled sentence. It's a technique that works terrifyingly well in a story like *Sister Doyle's*

HOW TO CONCEIVE OF A GIRL

By Beth Spencer
Vintage, \$16.95
BUILDING BABEL
By Suniti Namjoshi
Spinifex \$16.95
TO BE THERE WITH YOU
By Gayla Reid
Allen&Unwin, \$16.95

JENNY PAUSACKER

Men, where a woman remembers her mother's lifetime of nursing war veterans, in an intimate blend of history and individual experience.

However, when Reid moves from stories about childhood experience to stories about tangled adult relationships, the terse sentences and one-line paragraphs often seem to clip off the emotion a fraction too soon.

I admired her disciplined detail but there were also times when I wished that she would relax the discipline for a moment and experiment with other ways of telling tales.

That's something that I never needed to wish while I was reading *How to Conceive of a Girl* by Beth Spencer, born in Melbourne and now living in Sydney. Spencer writes in just about every style that I can think of right at this moment — dialogue, evocation, theory, magic realism, anecdote, letters, news items and creative appropriations of other texts, all patched together in collages that, despite their eclecticism, are far from random.

How to Conceive of a Girl ranges from a brief and complex description

of an abortion, through parallel accounts of leaving home and ending a relationship to *The Stories of Barbara Boulevard*, a woman inventing herself.

But the pieces that impressed me most were *Fatal Attraction in Newtown* and *The Faeries at Anakie Park*, where Spencer examines respectively the movie of (almost) the same name and the process of not having children.

In these pieces the collage method becomes a free-range meditation that obliterates all the distinctions we usually make between thought and feeling, essay and short story.

and now living in England.

On one level, Namjoshi is using poetry and fable and conflicting perspectives to suggest an alternative reality where archetypal figures (*Cinders*, *Alice*, *Sister Solitude*) struggle to recreate Babel, whose legendary fall brought about the fragmentation of language. On another level she opens out the struggle even further, by offering the reader the chance to contribute to the building of Babel on a Web site.

This is a bold and innovative concept, although at times Namjoshi seemed to be overwhelmed by her own innovations. There are two introductions by the author, an invitation from the publisher and a prologue/epilogue describing the 16 main characters, all of which makes entry into the narrative rather heavy going.

The story of Babel itself is further complicated by Namjoshi's attempt to develop 16 multiple commentaries as simultaneously as possible, which often left me breathless and blinking. But despite these disorientations, I ended by feeling *Building Babel* was an important development in Namjoshi's writing and an interesting experiment for fiction in general.

Indeed, each of these three writers spends a lot of time pushing the boundaries, though in wildly different ways.

Considered together, they share a passionate but not uncritical concern for women and indicate just how diverse and unpredictable feminist fiction has become.

Jenny Pausacker is a Melbourne writer and reviewer.

Spencer writes in about every style I can think of at the moment.

One minute Spencer is analysing *New Idea* on career women, next minute she's telling us how to make fairy wings.

If you immerse yourself and let the fragments accumulate, you get a new perspective on the messy, lateral workings of the human heart and mind. It's exhilarating.

Then, for another radically different approach, there's *Building Babel* by Suniti Namjoshi, born in India

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 1997

SMH

When history be comes

A HISTORY of the pun in the late 20th century might well begin with the word "history" itself: his-story, her-story. Such false etymologies are an essential part of the pun's slippery logic, skating off the polished surfaces of usage.

In *How to Conceive of a Girl*, Beth Spencer puns upon different senses of conception – vital and intellectual – to offer her-stories of a new femininity, while Leonie Stevens's *Big Man's Barbie* plays with a lighter, pop culture pun – barbecue and doll – as she uses history as something to be sampled into the texture of a picaresque romp.

Spencer's collection of short stories forms a chronicle of a generation (late '50s, early '60s) and a milieu (of educated, inner-city women). These are the women who matured in the '70s, undergoing the questioning that was part of that period's university

HOW TO CONCEIVE OF A GIRL

By Beth Spencer
Vintage, 327pp, \$16.95
ISBN 0 09 183439 2

BIG MAN'S BARBIE

Ten Days That Shook My Booty
By Leonie Stevens
Vintage, 358pp, \$17.95
ISBN 0 09 183343 4

Reviewed by
PETER HUTCHINGS

experience, most especially French feminist interrogations of ideas of femininity. Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig are two conceptual reference points for Spencer's attempt to think a

generation of Australian women capable of redeploying the term "girl" as an expression of their own. Girls conceive of themselves, but do not conceive or, at least, do not carry. *Born Again in Balmain* is the story of an abortion, of being born again as a girl, free of the conventions of womanhood.

Yet, as *The Faeries at Anakie Park* shows in its narrative of an affair with a married family man, opting out of the family plan isn't without its pains and regrets. That story begins in 1972, with a schoolgirl's dream:

"Last night," Linda Tebbut says, "I saw all you girls from 2C and 2B, walking down the main street of Lilydale, pregnant ... But I didn't see you, Peta."

Peta is the eternal girl: the story

interweaves childhood and adulthood with Spencer's adaptation of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. The combination is a characteristic touch, sparking off the pantomime tradition of casting a girl as Peter Pan, thinking through its implications for female subjectivity.

The reworking of a classic text, mixed with contemporary theory and other elements of a common culture, is characteristic of Spencer's style and its strengths. In *Fatal Attraction in Newtown* she mixes the narrator's upsetting experience of seeking exemption from jury duty (on the grounds of being an anarchist) with a screening of *Fatal Attraction* into an exploration of sexual politics and juridical violence that is both a powerful fiction and critical essay.

Spencer's relation to history is genealogical, concerned with the web of connections that form the present and its subjectivities, tracing the complex, post-'60s shifts in Australian culture and society which have affected her girls. This feminist concern separates her writing from an annoyingly dominant local literary preoccupation with childhood and adolescence. Her Peter Pan-like women are not trapped in nostalgia or familial relations: they are outside such strictures, seeking to understand what and where they are. Spencer uses the short story's tendency to focus upon ethically charged moments, and its kinship to the essay, to attempt a chart of this other space in a way that leaves open the title's "how to".

her-story

Big Man's Barbie comes on like Tarantino in Newtown,

...

For all its hipness, *Big Man's Barbie* is a rather conventional, knockabout, picaresque novel, right down to the final resolution of Siren and Ike's romantic coupling: the banality of a comic realism bereft of the theoretical concerns that distinguish and give weight to Spencer's more motivated explorations.

Peter Hutchings lives in the inner city and lectures in Postmodern Studies at UWS Hawkesbury.

GOOD WEEKEND NOV 1996

write up

How To Conceive of a Girl

Beth Spencer, Vintage

Gleefully divorcing herself from boring old naturalism, Beth Spencer flings herself into textual

free-fall in this strange, delightful book. And the risk pays off – from *Fatal Attraction in Newtown* to *Confessions of Wonder Woman* ("I want a baby!"), the collection simply buzzes. Stories, fragments and occasional lapses into poetry are thrown together in a jumble sale of ideas. Loosely traversing so-called "Generation X" territory,

Spencer investigates such subjects as Barbie Dolls, robot sex, drinking beer on an overnight train and Coles eyeshadow.

The feel is crazy, skittish, frisky (like schoolkids on a windy day) and not at all the turgid, "gritty" treatment this subject matter usually receives. More please.

– Cassie McCullagh



9.11.96

The City
Weekly

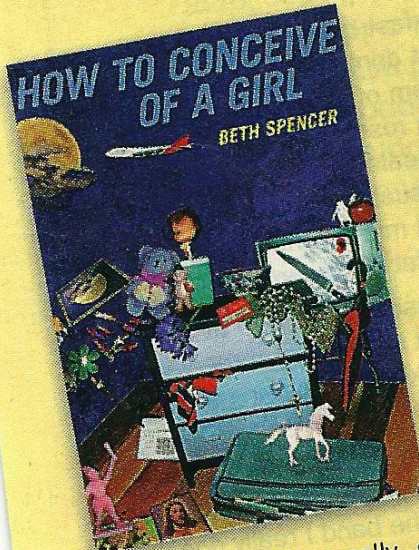
Time
IN

Feb 6-12
1997

p. 22

Read it

How To Conceive of a Girl,
Beth Spencer (Vintage, \$16.95)



This is something really special, even though it sends out self-consciously post-modern signals that may frighten the suspicious reader. Yes, some of these stories of single women are a little too clever, a little too high of concept, but even the least successful are written with an elegance and an eloquence that is inspiring. Spencer writes in the grey area between essay and story and poem without getting stuck in academic mind games. Her best is quite funny and sad and erotic. "A Lover of Space" is simply one of the loveliest stories I've read anywhere in ages. And there's every chance the next thing this talented writer does could be better still.

• Michelle Griffin

war, he wrote: "I have spent a solitary Christmas which next to having Laura's company or the few friends I can count on the toes of one foot, is just as I like it. I dined alone sitting opposite a looking glass & reflecting sadly that the years instead of transforming me into a personable man of middle age, have made

There was never a dispute about which of them was the more important writer. Mitford deferred to Waugh's far greater talent and always asked his advice, although she didn't always take it.

Waugh basked in her praise, and in return usually savaged her work. Of

snobbery her passion. In a glorious age. It dismayed her. Plastic instance, and rolls of lavender (rather than sheets) irritated immensely. Her disgust with the New Age extended to the New World. In 1947

Playful self-regard

AN EVENING WITH THE MESSIAH

By Catherine Jinks
Penguin Australia, 381pp, \$16.95

HOW TO CONCEIVE A GIRL
By Beth Spencer
Vintage, 327pp, \$16.95

By Michael Sharkey

YOU could spend your money on a lot of worse things than either of these books. Catherine Jinks writes a breezy sort of tale of a Sydney musician's family and the assorted hangers-on who lurk around them for a taste of reflected glory. Beth Spencer writes a more experimental collection of short stories, which variously workshop the idea of a woman's life without regular partners and babies.

Neither book is greatly exciting, but both are absorbing enough to help while away a few hours in an airport lounge while anticipating a flight to any place away from Sydney or Melbourne. Both books could sell well among the cognoscenti who want to see their lives in Sydney's Glebe, Surry Hills, Tamarama or inner-city Melbourne tinged with the glamour of fictional memorialising: terrace houses, cafes, shared houses, endless conversations about serial sex and concern about "creating" something worth living for — a concerto, a book of poems, a collection of stories.

These material touchstones seem to be the guarantees that lives spent shuffling around the circles of those globalised cultural wens have any solidity at all.

I am fairly unmoved by Jinks's effort to convince me that the lives of her characters are worth worrying about once I put down her book and I'm sometimes sceptical that Spencer's short stories have a life beyond the ideology they manifest.

Jinks writes well, if often garrulously, about a charismatic Sydney conductor and music teacher who attracts a bevy of male and female acolytes keen to share his life. The calculating old bat Dorothy who annually sings Handel's *Messiah* in his massed choir, the dotting students,



Artwork: Igor Saktor

the devoted wife, the sons and daughters, and the would-be boyfriend of his daughter Ellen reflect social strata around Sydney's suburbs.

But the male lead, Jamie Mignacca, for all his cute looks and brooding moods, has the emotional depth of Warhol's beefcake hustler in *Heat*, and if the girl can't see that he's a dead-set non-starter, it's because she's wholly inexperienced or a brick short.

The all but endless discussion between the contenders for the conductor, the beefcake or any other male's affections suggests a lifetime of reading Dolly, and the prose in these sections rarely soars above contemporary Girl's Own surfaces.

JINKS'S most memorable characters are Stuart, the alcoholic would-be composer of concertos, and the busily insinuating Dorothy, who achieves her heart's desire by inflicting herself on the hapless family of the beautiful conductor. The story concludes with the clues to several mysteries still hinted at, but I'm not convinced that the chicanery of the characters (the lonely masturbator, the drunken composer, the menacing Jamie) compels me to agonise over the possible resolution of the mystery.

With Spencer, the structure and the result are trickier. Ideas dominate her prose to such an extent that I was induced to read the collection with a

degree of avidity to see how she'd vary the method. I like the way she tracks back and forth, in these 11 stories, over the theme of the single woman who rejects marriage and the family. Though it can pall at times, her prose is studded with sharp observations (where Jinks's is characterised by inordinate amounts of often banal detail).

Spencer's book will appeal to anyone with an interest in ways of breaking out of sequential narrative. Her montage or collage assembly of incidents and reflections, rearrangements of time and place, attract me enormously, after the this-follows-that technique of much contemporary chronicling of life among the young and self-regarding.

Spencer's aphoristic turn of phrase, her narrators' amusing exhortations of the family and her risk-taking intercuts of fairytale, pop-cultural chatter and cultural commentary make her stories a welcome relief from the unremitting high seriousness of several of her peers.

Self-regarding? Her work certainly is, but the playfulness of the methods she employs and the self-questioning throughout (in parentheses, like this comment) reflect an intellectual toughness that deserves to be encouraged and promoted. If you don't warm to every story, don't give up: they're worth the effort.

Michael Sharkey teaches English at the University of New England.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15

Compile
Upcom
http://w
At Rea

The weekend Australian, 14-15 Dec 1996 p 8

Marie Clare

marie clare
Nov 1996
p. 94

Books

by PHILIPPA HAWKER

DIY FEMINISM

Edited by Kathy Bail
(Allen & Unwin, \$19.95)

For "riot grrrrs, guerilla girls, net chicks, cyber chix, tankgirls, supergirls, action girls, deep girls", Australian *Rolling Stone* editor Bail has assembled essays, personal histories, articles, cartoons and song lyrics. *DIY Feminism* is a hard-hitting, entertaining collection that shows how young women of the '90s are doing it their way, making inventive, powerful and individualistic contributions to modern feminism.

HOW TO CONCEIVE OF A GIRL

Beth Spencer
(Vintage, \$16.95)

This is a collection of writing that defies easy definition, combining short story, essay, montage and reverie, sometimes on the same page. Spencer moves from dreamlike fantasy to acute analysis of sexual politics, mixing skewer-sharp character detail with luridly funny evocations of the '70s, juxtaposing pop-culture savvy with searching evocations of desire. Rewarding and engrossing reading.

ALIAS GRACE

Margaret Atwood
(Bloomsbury, \$35)

This multifaceted mystery is based on a famous Canadian case of the 1840s, when a 16-year-old servant, Grace Marks, was accused of murdering her employer and his housekeeper. Since then, debate has raged over Grace's involvement. Was she the killer, the instigator, the catalyst or an innocent victim of someone else's violence? With

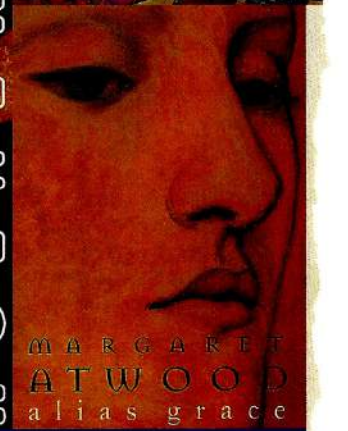
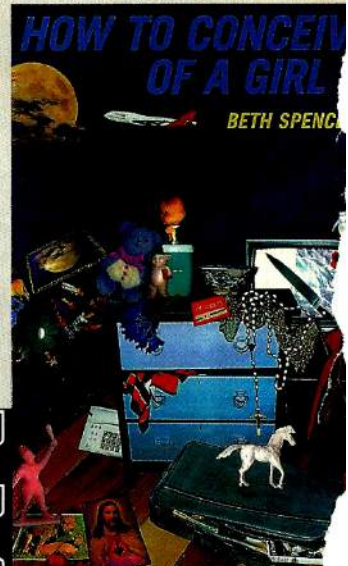
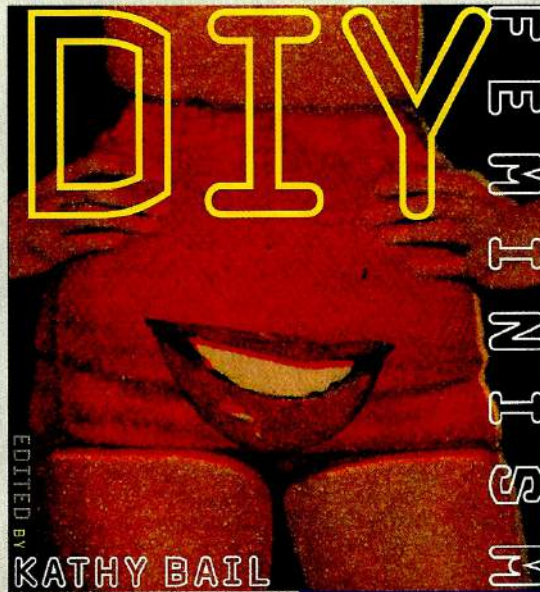
customary intelligence and clarity, Atwood explores the power Grace Marks exercised over the imagination of her contemporaries and the ways in which she still haunts us.

THE DROWNER

Robert Drewe
(Macmillan, \$35)

Will Dance is the son of a water diviner, or "drowner", who

Falkiner conjured up a romanticised version of her father's mother. In the 1980s, she determined to investigate Ethel's history, to try to make sense of its secrets, its mysteries and its disappointments. In *Ethel: A Love Story*, she manages to re-create a life and times in luminous, vivid and sometimes unsparring detail.



watch out for

- *The Story Of The Night* by Colm Toibin (Picador, \$29.95). Set in Argentina in the 1980s, this is a novel of political intrigue and desire.
- *Red Leaves* by Paullina Simons (Flamingo, \$19.95). Unusual murder-mystery exploring the death of a gifted student with a secret life.
- *One Room In A Castle* by Karen Connelly (Flamingo, \$17.95). Travel-writing of an idiosyncratic kind; a meditative account of a woman's voyage of discovery told in letter form.
- *To Be There With You: Stories Of Longing And Desire* by Gayla Reid (Allen & Unwin, \$16.95). Exact, observant tales spanning decades and continents.

Top shelf

THE SUNDAY AGE • 2 FEBRUARY 1997

EDITOR'S CHOICE

'How to Conceive of a Girl' by Beth Spencer, Vintage, \$16.95.

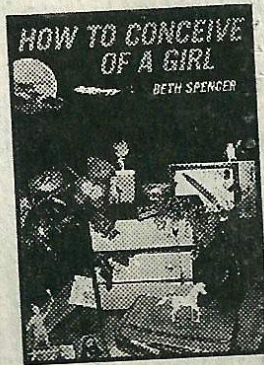
THIS novel rejects the linear narrative in favor of fragments of stories within stories, a pastiche of poetry and prose, fairytales and veiled social criticism. Spencer controls it all with great verve,

weaving a colorful tapestry.

It has a definite feminist agenda but no pushy didacticism —

Spencer gets her point across with humor and whimsy.

Western patriarchal philosophy has long relegated the female as Other: opposite to and incomplete without the male. These stories joyfully undermine the concept.



Thuy On

THRILLS

'Charlie's Chance' by Brian Freemantle, Orion Books, \$35.

BRIAN Freemantle's spy turned anti-nuclear smuggler, Charlie Muffin, is more forthright and adventurous than Le Carre's George Smiley or Len Deighton's Bernard Samson. Muffin is under threat of retrenchment when

ARB DEC 96

An Extract from Kathleen Mary Fallon's
launching of Beth Spencer's
How to Conceive of a Girl

READING BETH Spencer's *How to Conceive of a Girl*, I remembered something Janet Frame wrote in *Living in the Maniototo*:

the kind of pain that makes a writer want to throw away the words that are screens, moveable walls, decorations, unnecessary furniture and keep only the load bearing words [redacted] that stop the sky from falling.

Spencer is a writer who knows these 'load bearing words'. She doesn't take any easy routes. There's nothing flashy, nothing glib in Spencer.

This is not to say there is no pleasure in the text, no sense of humour or play. But it's real tough writing with nothing transcendent about it, no New Age Matriarchal salvation here, no ecstatic lesbian conversion moment, no *deus ex machina*, or lover of baby, just the relentless process of exposing the quality of the consciousness of the gendered mind, aware of itself in the constant act/process of constructing itself in the world. The book speaks/performs the constant process of becoming a girl; the ceaseless process of a girl conceiving of herself within the massive cultural machine/matrix in which she is so thoroughly conceived already. Spencer's book is the process of negotiating this matrix.

A large part of the energy that activates the book is the energy around gender that has not solidified, settled. It is still labile, molten.

When I was a little girl I thought all fairies and angels were women. The day I discovered that cherubim were boys... it was like one of those great big metal candle extinguishers coming down out of heaven and putting out a flame.

She identifies some of the issues operating in the turbulence of this labile, unsettled state. Mother/daughter relationships, the place of materiality/matter, the struggles around representation, exploring aspects of femininity articulated by psychoanalysis — the supposed constructs of passivity, masochism, narcissism, autism in the female subject.

Now autism is an interesting one. I was struck by parallels between *How to Conceive of a Girl* and Donna Williams' *Nobody, Nowhere* and *Somebody, Somewhere* in which Williams writes of the experience of growing up suffering from, what she claims is, undiagnosed autism.

Autism, according to Williams, is an embattled position, a place of fear and panic over boundary confusions. One lives with an excruciating awareness of the plethora of rules and taboos. A parable of the madness and impossibility of 'femininity', of the horror of trying to comprehend and follow those rules and taboos is described by Spencer when she writes about virginity testing.

The doctor tells her stories of clients who ask him to test for their daughter's virginity. He says that were he to do so, he would most likely have to break the hymen. 'Ironic, isn't it?'; he asks. 'They bring me their daughters intact, virginal, totally innocent. And unless I can find and break the hymen with my hands they are unhappy. If I can make their daughters bleed, they are satisfied. The girls are nervous and tense, sometimes they cannot stop crying. For them it would be like being raped.'

Barbara knows this: the ministers probing in the sealed room; her parents waiting anxiously outside. Ironic, yes. If she lost her innocence at any one point, she would say it was then, in that room, at the minister's hand's.

... cont →

ARB contd.

The autistic person lives in emotional isolation, overwhelmed by fears of vulnerability. As Williams says 'feeling safe is a tiring business', where life is a battle-field or a stage, where one learns either fight/flight or to perform. In *How to Conceive of a Girl* we watch Spencer's female characters in the act of learning their performance. The performance is done with mirrors, within the gaze.

Someone forced to watch all day long the terrible secrets of our bodies.

In those days, if we lacked a mirror...we could always use each other. The one putting on her face would be guided by the look of the one watching.

Here's Williams negotiating in this mirror maze-gaze, trying to connect with the Other, 'This time she was *not* fighting to mirror someone else. She was fighting to come out to someone who was *her* mirror.' Engaging with this sort of work we can never fall into blissful unconsciousness, innocent naïveté, again.

What Williams describes as her autism it seems to me Spencer has described as emerging female subjectivity struggling to consciously exist. This is interesting in light of the controversy around whether Williams is or is not 'truly' autistic. Perhaps the pressures on the emergence of female subjectivity, sexuality, language mimic 'autism'; are a sort of *faux* autism. Perhaps what both are describing is a gender violence, the *faux* autistic process of conceiving of a girl in the world where this is supposed to be the most natural of things.

Spencer's voice is contemporary, local. Takes its strength from that in its inventions and reinventions. Using anything in its hang-glide from secure theoretical and metaphysical position. Using, for one thing, the material world, (the world of mother/matter/mutter to quote de Laurentis) as dream material in her work to inscribe the female into the symbolic/social, that is from 'nature' into 'culture' (where women have been left representing 'nature'.) Her symbolic includes TV game shows, Barbie dolls, a vinyl suitcase, not to be cheaply topical or kitsch-cute but because the unconscious is no snob, it attaches itself and makes use of these cultural artefacts and imbues them with meaning/significance. It is all

dream material and Spencer indicates new possibilities in our relationship with mother/matter/mutter where it is not simply stuff to be transcended.

By revealing that there's nothing 'natural' about being/becoming/conceiving of a girl, by bringing this into language, literature and therefore culture, Spencer makes it more possible to re-think/renege the social contract. These abrasion/articulations of this female subjectivity in its constant process of becoming, is the sound of the female subject becoming fully human and the full articulation of this, is part of the responsibility of assuming this full humanity. It is the sort of conceptual/creative work that must be done if women are to refuse the limiting and destructive positions of victim, innocent naïve, or blank automaton in ceaseless unconscious re-enactments of *faux* passivity, *faux* narcissism, *faux* masochism, *faux* autism of ourselves within the nightmare of the maze-haze.

I've been using the Annie Leibovitz photo of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, December 8, 1980, that I ripped out of the National Gallery catalogue, as a bookmark while reading *How to Conceive of a Girl*. I have always found this photograph both piercingly beautiful and almost repulsive in its transgressions. I have always assumed that the transgressive nature of this photo was the trigger that decided X?? to shoot Lennon, never being able to bring fully and permanently into consciousness the fact that he was shot only hours after Leibovitz shot the photograph, so, rationally, X?? could never have seen it. The photograph, the murder, my confusion, the synchronicity all alert me to the dangers inherent involved in broadening gender definitions, in boundary crossing, in abseiling and hang-gliding from secure subject positions; that is in bringing the unknown, the unarticulated, the disavowed into cultural consciousness. It's a serious business whether it's done on a battlefield or a stage. And I'm always grateful and amazed, renewed in my attempts to continue doing this when I read work like *How to Conceive of a Girl*. You could say that it en/genders courage.

Kathleen Mary Fallon launched this book in October 1996. Beth Spencer's work has previously been published in anthologies.

Overland 1997

Ditto Man and Peta Pan

THUY ON

Beth Spencer: *How to Conceive of a Girl* (Vintage, \$16.95).

HOW TO CONCEIVE OF A GIRL is a montage novel that rejects the straightforward linear narrative. Within the book there are choppy bits, fragments of stories within stories, a pastiche of prose, poetry, fairy tales, quotations and veiled social criticism. Feeble-hearted readers fed on a strict diet of linear progression and inter-connecting thought may blanch at Spencer's disembodied kaleidoscopic fragments. In a lesser writer, the whole structure may indeed seem a dissonant mess; a clumsy agglomeration of bits and pieces or an exercise in aping postmodernist flux. But Spencer writes with great verve and manages to weave together the threads of a colourful tapestry.

Spencer herself has said: "My stuff is really knotted together and it gets its points across metaphorically and through images and with jokes." The title, *How to Conceive of a Girl*, comes from an essay by French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray. The book has a definite feminist agenda, but Spencer is too astute a writer to pander to pushy didacticism. She gets her point across by using humour and whimsy. Western patriarchal philosophy has long relegated the female as the 'Other'; the opposite of and incomplete without, the male. In these stories and novellas, Spencer undermines and ridicules such a concept.

Viewed through Spencer's uniquely tinted glasses, gender politics are explored: 'Fatal Attraction in Newtown', for instance, critiques the way women are portrayed as either virgin or whore. The movie, starring Glenn Close, was a blockbuster; its success largely dependent on the spectacle of Close's character (Alex) spiralling into a psychotic madness when spurned by a married man. Unlike the sweet-stay-at-home wife, Alex is damningly represented as the unreasonable, the irrational, the hysterical female so beloved of nineteenth-century literature. There are two sides to every coin, says Spencer and Alex is "the dark one, the swept under the carpet side." Disturbed by the misogynistic treatment of women in the movie, she champions a "refuge for the unreasonable. Ophelia. Madame Bovary. Rochester's mad wife from *Jane Eyre*: the discarded ones, the drowned women, the self-mutilators."

Meanwhile, 'Space' deals variously with all aspects of personal space. Whether it be the difficulty of a long distance relationship, the territorial boundaries of being a teenager, or the trials of a mother trying to cope with an 'empty nest'. Spencer is always conscious of the startling metaphor, the bon mot, the snappy one-liner. She defines adolescence, for example, as "like walking into a room

in which someone has switched off all the lights". A lover is christened 'Ditto Man' because of his habit of never volunteering, but only echoing compliments; a passive parent is scathingly called 'Wallpaper father' and a short piece about having an abortion is evocatively titled 'Born Again'. Even Germaine Greer's famous witticism is tinkered with. In the mid to late seventies, says Spencer, "a woman needed a baby like a fish needed a bicycle helmet." Spencer clearly has a lot of fun subverting traditional notions. In 'The Faeries at Anakie Park', for instance, J.M. Barrie's classic character is changed to Peta Pan. "The child who never grew up" is a charge often levelled at Spencer, because at age twenty-five, she was still unmarried and childless. "No penis, no child, what does that make me?" she asks. And then answers her own rhetorical question. "I have nothing to govern and nothing governs me."

How to Conceive of a Girl is an empowering, witty and incisive comment on the seventies and eighties sexual-cultural scene, written with the confidence of a woman of the nineties. Beth Spencer won the 1993 Age Short Story award and the inaugural Dinny O'Hearn Fellowship. She has been widely published in various journals. Judging by this book, let's hope she conceives of more writing projects.

Thuy On is a Melbourne reviewer.

WEEKEND

LIVING IN THE SEVENTIES

A maligned decade is given a novel spin, says **NADINE CRESSWELL-MYATT**



How to Conceive of a Girl,
by Beth Spencer.
Vintage, \$16.95.

BETH Spencer aligns herself with Generation X — those nudging at the heels of the baby boomers. Xers were part of the first generation to grow up in front of televisions and become bound by repeats of *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch*. But if the staple diet was junk television, the finishing courses were arts degrees — generalist courses with endless possibilities.

It is this legacy of the '70s, where the popular and academic churn in a shifting alliance, that characterises Spencer's writing in *How to Conceive of a Girl*.

The Addams Family, Karl Marx, excerpts from *New Idea*, Luce Irigaray's poetry, Rod Stewart's lyrics and the theories of Roland Barthes are all vitaminised together.

In all the turbulence it is easy to feel saturated. And Spencer is not a writer to cast you a linear life-line. But as she says of writing about the '70s: "Maybe realism is inadequate for exploring the confused contradictory fragmented mess that was."

So go with the flow when reading this. One connection invariably leads to another and, despite jagged edges, the prose glides. Even if the '70s wasn't your heyday, there's been enough fashion revivals, television repeats and solid gold to ensure you feel a conspiratorial familiarity.

Spencer's stories deal with growing up in the '70s — school days, first loves and family relationships. Even when set in the present they often examine hangovers from that era — the "better dead than wed" and "burn Barbie at the stake" thinking that changed forever our conception of what it means to be a girl.

Nadine Cresswell-Myatt is a teacher of creative writing and a literary critic.

BARBIE MEETS GERTRUDE STEIN

HOW TO CONCEIVE OF A GIRL

By Beth Spencer
Vintage. Random House Australia
\$16.95 327 pages Paperback

ENZA GANDOLFO

BETH SPENCER'S short stories have been published in number of magazines and anthologies in recent years. *How to Conceive of a Girl* is her first collection. Spencer's willingness to experiment with the short story form, to play with language and ideas results in fiction that is at its best ironic, humorous, irreverent and critically engaging.

In *How to Conceive of a Girl* Beth Spencer surrounds us with the familiar—Barbie dolls, high heels, and shopping trips, television shows, films, and fairy shops where modern little girls hold their birthday parties. Cutting across these icons of popular culture are the voices of feminism: *The Female Eunuch*, Luce Irigaray and Gertrude Stein. There is a strong sense of time in these stories: they are unmistakably a product of the 80s and 90s. Spencer uses the landscape of the city, of the domestic, to create a recognisable world, a world in which a carnival of characters comes to life, where the unexpected is just a sentence away from the familiar.

The stories are linked by a primary concern with women's lives. Women's relationships with family and friends, women's sexuality and identity.

That night I cried on top of the orgasm. I've never done that before. It frightened me, the realisation that there isn't even a fine line between pain and pleasure: a gasp becomes a sob before you are even aware of it. But you know there was the pleasure. (Wasn't there?)

There must have been, if you had to pick the remains from your teeth for days afterwards ...

Dreams, fantasies, and myths are intertwined, reality is fluid, hard to grasp, full of secrets, lies, and rules that are made to keep women in their place. The women in these stories refuse to be kept in their place.

Feminism is central to these stories, to the lives of Spencer's characters. Feminism forms part of the fabric of their lives, they are a product of feminism, their view of the world is informed by it.

'The Faeries of Anakie Park', is the longest (novella length) and the most powerful story in the collection. Peta (as in Pan) explores the issue of child bearing—those who can, those who can't, those who do and those who don't:

the cabbage-patch doll which she had bought from K-Mart and which is lying in state in a box on the dining room table, represents the child she wanted but now accepts she will never have ...

Questions are raised here about the way having children is dealt with in our society—the fairytale notions of motherhood, the increasing intervention of technology, the way child bearing (whether you have children or not) affects women's lives:

Simone de Beauvoir used to complain that no one ever asked Sartre if he regretted not having children. But Sartre was the Father of Existentialism; and what was she? Just a writer.

Spencer has an eye for detail, she creates a world of the senses: we can smell the teenage boy's onion breath, we can see the Barbie doll displayed in the Coles window, we can taste 'Family Assorted ... Nice—pronounced "niece", Chocolate Creams, Shortbread Fingers and those awful ones with the koalas on them'. We can feel the daughter's resentment for her 'mother's lament: *I tried to do my best.*'

In 'Stories of Barbara Boulevard', one of my favourite stories in this collection, Barbara has divorced herself from her past and moved to Perth to take ownership of her life. She struggles in her relationships with men, in her friendships with women. Her struggles are the struggles of the

**Aust
Women's
Book
Review
Dec 1996**

everywoman—we can see ourselves in her. She fills her life with imaginary friends, with fantasies, the only place she can find love is in her friendship with a neighbour's child but this too is tenuous.

The story's underlying question, where can a woman go to find herself, is left unanswered, for the 'assassin' is always there 'on the bridge, waiting with open arms (...) if this was a dream Barbara would wake now, dissolved in sweat. If it were a movie this is where the film would begin to fade or the camera tip: a bird's cry and a patch of sky with clouds scudding'.

Spencer often uses popular culture, film and television, to reflect and engage with the myths perpetuated about women. In 'Fatal Attraction in Newtown', for example, she takes Alex and Dan off the screen into Newtown. The film is remade in the story and we are taken into and beyond the film to question the notions of the 'bad' woman, the mistress who did not know her place.

I enjoyed reading Spencer's stories, at times they made me laugh, they constantly made me reflect, once or twice they made me cry.

My only disappointment with this collection is to do with the collection itself, rather than any individual story. There is a sameness about the stories, especially in the tone and voice. This is not a problem when stories are published individually but in a collection there needs to be more diversity, more variety, otherwise individual stories lose some of their power, their strength. Readers need to be wary of this, my advice is to leave space/time between the reading of each story (all short story collections should be read this way, I think, but this one more so than most).

Beth Spencer is a talented and inspiring writer. Her stories address issues central to women's lives with spirit, honesty and humour.

Enza Gandolfo is a Melbourne writer.