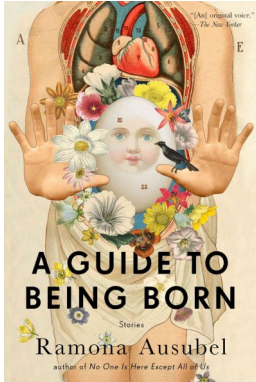


Parenthood, Birth, and Other Transformations



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In *A Guide to Being Born*, Ausubel's narrative voice is strong and unique. She takes chances in her fiction yet unlike some modern authors, she still includes distinct narrative threads. You can tell she is an independent-minded author just from the layout of her collection--four sections titled: Birth, Gestation, Conception, and Love. Notice the order of her subjects, the reverse of what you might expect.

I fell in love with the first story "Safe Passage." It begins this way, "The Grandmothers?dozens of them?find themselves at sea." This boat full of older women find themselves adrift with hundreds of crates; they open them to see if any of the items will allow them to save themselves. The story is funny, whimsical, and fantastical all at once. Plus, it conceals a deeper level that you won't discover right away. The grandmothers find shipping containers full of yellow roses, and they fill their arms with them despite the fact that the thorns leave blood tracks on their hands. Another fantasy-rich story is "Chest of Drawers." Toward the end of the wife's pregnancy, her husband suddenly grows live drawers on his chest, a problem that necessitates many medical appointments and tests. Yet, the compartments come in handy for carrying things such as his wife's lipstick and a bunch of tiny diversity dolls.

"Poppyseed" reveals what life is like for the parents of a very disabled child who is starting to enter puberty at age eight. The mother writes a series of letters that show her love and devotion to the child, but also her skewed take on her daughter's abilities. The daughter can't read them any of the letters.

In the last story "Tributaries," Principal Kevin has a fake arm that he must take off each night to care for. Five young girls at his school, including his daughter Genevieve, decide at a slumber party to create some fake love arms. Each one they create, they name after a favorite boy. Such is the power of their faith in young love that they check each other's side bodies for the nubs of new arms. The story describes the loss a man feels and how the children close to him create a fable that makes what he is missing become both bearable and romantic.

Ausubel's writing is detailed and believable despite the fantasies she carefully includes in each story. The characters seem real and her prose is beautiful. It transports you to far-fetched places that look very much like the here and now but are wondrously different in small ways. A wonderful collection not to be missed.

Another story collection you might try is Mary Gatskill's *Don't Cry*, a group of stories that

