

Prairie Heat

Dean Bakopoulos's Midwestern couple on the brink maneuver themselves into complicated sleeping arrangements.

By JENNIFER B. McDONALD

SEX. IN FICTION, as in life, it is a great catalyst, setting knickers and plots atwist. Also as in life, the sex in fiction, especially that had by adults behaving badly, is often far less interesting than the underlying tensions and motives that led to the bad behavior in the first place.

So it goes in "Summerlong," Dean Bakopoulos's third novel, about a middle-aged couple's teetering marriage and the ways it is tested, by blows sudden and long-

SUMMERLONG

By Dean Bakopoulos

354 pp. Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers.
\$26.99.

simmering, over the course of one hot, heavy-breathing season.

The book is set in Grinnell, Iowa — Bakopoulos is writer in residence at Grinnell College — and is told from the perspectives of several characters. Don and Claire Lowry, both 38 and the parents of two children, are the spouses on the brink. Don, a real estate agent whose mug and cornball slogan ("It's your home, but it's my business!") are plastered all over town, grew up poor in Grinnell, coveting the bourgeois life. Although to his neighbors he exudes success, he is secretly flailing: burdened by debt, haunted by the ghost of his alcoholic father and stunned to realize that his "long, mostly happy" marriage is now a festeringly unhappy one.

Claire, who grew up in Manhattan, was once a writer. But "something" — motherhood? isolation? Iowa? — has obliterated within her any sense of the woman she once was. She rarely writes. She has no friends. Her days are consumed by childcare logistics and drudgery. Although she and Don still get it on with remarkable frequency, she mainly feels resentment toward him and weariness over her family's unceasing need, "everyone around her demanding reassurance, as if there is a bottomless well of it, as if there is nothing that scares or overwhelms her."

As the novel opens, Don is out walking. With his first lines Bakopoulos draws our attention to the fertile landscape of the Midwest and the febrile inner landscape of his leading man: "In the newly turned black earth, he smells energy and promise, which buoys him in a way he has not felt buoyed in some time, and he feels, along with the whole twitching prairie, as if he is on the verge of something either beautiful or terrible."

What he is on the verge of is chancing upon an alluring young woman sprawled on the ground. This is Amelia Benitez-



JOOHEE YOON

Coors, who is known as ABC, a recent graduate of Grinnell who spends her days smoking pot, mourning a dead lover and caring for an aged widow, Ruth. To Don, ABC seems to have "fallen from a high bough," and indeed her role is that of the nubile angel, arrived to captivate and comfort. She happens to be suicidal — not in a bleak way, but in a cheerful, dizzily philosophical way — and soon is convinced that Don is a human "vessel" sent to usher her to the "spirit world."

On the same night Don stumbles into temptation, Claire is seized with the urge to take a run. In the parking lot of a Kum & Go (not an "interstate smut den," Bakopoulos informs the uninitiated, but a modest convenience store, "earnest and well lit"), she pauses to buy cigarettes, realizes she has forgotten her wallet, and takes out her frustration, with some violence, on an ice machine. Cue Charlie, a 29-year-old actor and Grinnell native, back in town to sort through his ailing father's voluminous (and, we learn, scandalous) papers. He is quick to offer cigarettes, beer and other varieties of bait, anything to woo Claire out of her anesthetized existence.

A conventional question — will they or won't they? — drives the suspense. But Bakopoulos has set out to tell a more complex story about fidelity, loneliness and breakdown, to explore what brings people to that 3 o'clock hour when, as Fitzgerald

wrote in "The Crack-Up," "the tendency is to refuse to face things as long as possible by retiring into an infantile dream."

He is partly successful. Over the course of the summer, Bakopoulos's characters — libidinous, delusional and increasingly intoxicated — maneuver their way into complicated sleeping arrangements, culminating in a trip to the edge of a lake where destinies are met and plot lines re-

Issues of fidelity and loneliness, tied to the old question: Will they or won't they?

solved. The book as a whole is something like sex: by turns steamy, lovely, angry and clumsy, a muddle of fantasy, emotional baggage and awkward moments that amounts, by the climax, to a bit of a sticky mess.

As he demonstrated in his previous novels, "Please Don't Come Back From the Moon" and "My American Unhappiness," Bakopoulos has a talent for weaving pathos with humor. His Midwest, described with wry tenderness, is beautiful but sad, like many of his characters. Dive bars are populated by "meth heads and farmers and blown-apart high school football failures, . . . an invented family held together by bad decisions and muted rage and the occasionally intense night of karaoke with undergraduates." The terrain, with its

"verdant yet desolate fields," "doesn't try to alleviate your pain with splendor."

Bakopoulos is especially perceptive about the tedious and demoralizing aspects of motherhood, and about the guilt endemic in women who yearn to retain a sense of self in the face of forces which insist that self — identity, ambition, appetite — must be relinquished when one bears children. Claire is a hot ball of regret, her every choice up for interrogation. Bakopoulos's portrayal of her mind's chaos is a high point of the novel.

PASSING IN AND out of the action is Ruth, ABC's octogenarian charge. Ruth bears close resemblance to Armistead Maupin's Anna Madrigal, from the "Tales of the City" novels, with her endless cache of marijuana ("purely medicinal, of course"), closely held secrets and steady supply of wise-old-lady pronouncements. To ABC: "Loneliness is a kind of suffering you can alleviate. It's not something you have to endure, like grief." To Don: "Midlife is when you have to accept what you've created, knowing that the life you have is the only one you will live." To Claire: "Nobody forgives mothers."

From Ruth's mouth spills a fanciful piece of foreshadowing — involving the "profound change" augured by the appearance of fireflies — that is at first played as an eccentric notion but soon becomes a heavy-handed refrain, with the blinking bugs popping up at a rate bordering on silliness. Imagine introducing Chekhov's gun and, instead of stashing it away until the third act, taking it out repeatedly to bang the audience on the head with it. (Speaking of which: The novel has a gun, too, though perhaps we should call it Fitzgerald's, as it's relegated to a subplot heavy on references to "The Great Gatsby.")

There are other problems, of structure and tone. Prematurely, Bakopoulos blunts the stakes. Momentous sex is had. A windfall is produced. But his characters have an entire family vacation and several scenes of melodrama yet to survive. Fitzgerald wrote that the truly "sunk" retreat into dream, foolishly "hoping that things will adjust themselves by some great material or spiritual bonanza." Bakopoulos furnishes the material and some version of the spiritual, in a manner that feels too easy and ultimately untrue. The strain shows on the page in the form of baggier writing, contrived dialogue and jarring turns in behavior and mood.

And so as with sex, whether "Summerlong" is good for you may depend on the expectations you bring to the proceedings. If you're looking for a sustained, intensely meaningful performance, the novel may disappoint. But if you're down for a fling — complete with titillating premises and foregone conclusions — then dive in. It's summertime, after all. □