Book Review: *Tongues of Flame*

Margaret Proctor

*Grand Valley State University*

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Publishing this first collection of short stories at age sixty-nine, Mary Ward Brown is a contemporary of Eudora Welty and only a scant twenty years behind William Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter. These superb stories mark her as a writer of their world. New South in setting, they are distinctly Old South in character and in theme.

Some recent Southern writers portray people who live fully in Lifestyle, U.S.A.; who watch soap operas, divorce, and buy recreational vehicles when they retire. In *Tongues of Flame* there are no TV's or RV's. True, youngsters play rock music, and the Civil Rights movement has unalterably changed black-white relations. But Mrs. Brown's characters are preoccupied with the past: they long for it or they fight it.

In the opening story, "New Dresses," Lisa, a Northerner married to David Worthy of the old Worthy's jewelry store, takes her dying mother-in-law to shop for a dress one last time. Lisa would shop at Lowe's, "which had a younger, newer clientele; but Mrs. Worthy did most of her shopping at Hagedorn's, and for forty years."

David prefers the past too. Lisa bought a new king-size bed for their marriage but sells it when she realizes David wants to sleep with her in the poster bed from his old bedroom. "David still referred to his mother's house as home, to their own home as the house. I'll run by home and see Mama, then meet you at the house," he began to say each afternoon as Mrs. Worthy grew worse."

Lisa, who in childhood liked "piggy banks, coins, and numbers, not dolls," is the bookkeeper at Worthy's. But that calling does not satisfy the people of Wakefield, the town where many of the stories take place: She should love her husband a reasonable amount, they seemed to think, and spread the rest around (family, friends, a good cause or hobby). When, in eight years, she had played no bridge, produced no child, joined no clique or club, they gave up on her. She was simply David Worthy's wife, "a girl from up north somewhere."

Mary Ward Brown is master of the small detail that helps us see a character or scene. Mrs. Worthy, formerly well-dressed, was now so thin that her old London Fog coat "fell from her shoulders as from a hanger."

There is humor, too. A saleswoman's girdled hips make "a motion like windshield wipers." In "The Cure," an old alcoholic doctor suddenly looks at his patient with new interest as he recalls, "Ain't you the one used to make that good muscadine wine?" Sometimes an object becomes a symbol of what the characters are thinking; they project onto it their frustration, grief, or rage. In "The Amaryllis," a retired judge, bereaved and lonely, invites anyone he can find over to see his recently-bloomed amaryllis, "the most beautiful thing I ever saw," he says. In a dazzling ending, Mrs. Brown shows us the amaryllis in its full physical detail, each feature revealing to us the flower's meaning to this man.

We see white people, alone or isolated from spouse and community, whether they live in the porticoed plantations of their ancestors or in apartments or in small farm houses. We see people whose religion fails them or who fail their religion. In "Disturber of the Peace," a young woman who cannot get over being jilted shortly before her marriage becomes obsessed by a huge cross which the Methodist church opposite her apartment lights up every night. In the title story, "Tongues of..."
Flame," crazy old alcoholic E. L. may yet come to Jesus at the revival meetings, thinks Dovey, a devout woman who has befriended him. But Dovey is plagued by a dream in which she was "flooded with pleasure" when E. L. began to fondle her breast.

And we see blacks in these stories. "The Cure" depicts a tough old black woman determined to hang on to life. In "Fruit of the Season," a black boy picking dewberries for the white woman his mother works for cannot control his veiled rage when he sees the white woman's magnificent house and thinks of his own two-room hovel. "His eyes seemed to darken. Without a word, he gathered up the saliva in his mouth, leaned over, and spit on the berries."

When there is affection between blacks and whites, it sometimes comes more from one side than the other, as is subtly shown in a final scene in "Beyond Two Forks." An old black woman, Queen, has accompanied her former mistress all day trying to help the white woman find someone to clean for her. They sit in the black woman's cabin. "Don't look so pitiful, Miss. I'll come back up there and help you," Queen says at last. The white woman, the narrator, graciously refuses (Queen is too old) and gets up to leave.

I put my arms around her. Like Mannie, she accepted but did not return my displays of affection. She did not open her arms, for instance, and hug me back but only patted lightly with one hand.

In my embrace her flesh gave way and the bones beneath felt bare and brittle. Old. She freed herself as from a child, and opened the door.

"Done got dark out there," she said.

A housewife for thirty-one years, Mrs. Brown reminds us of other women authors who have had to put off writing until the children were grown up. Let us hope Mary Ward Brown writes more, for her stories are masterful — rich, beautifully crafted, with lives that speak to all of us.

Margaret Proctor


It was a surprise when this novel appeared last year — the first novel by Tom Wolfe. The author, after all, has sometimes been blamed for the death of the modern serious novel.

One of the developers of the "new journalism" in the 60s and 70s, Wolfe believed that the techniques of fiction should be applied to journalism — that truth was not only stranger than fiction but also truer than fiction and more interesting, provided it was presented in the best way, which happened to be the fictional mode as it has been developed over the past 250 years.

So Tom Wolfe had produced hundreds of magazine articles and a string of successful non-fiction books, including The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Steamline Baby, Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers, The Right Stuff, and From Bauhaus to Our House. They often read "like fiction," with novel-like dialogue, narration, character description, and figurative language, particularly sequences of images and patches of offbeat jargon.

The success of the new non-fiction paralleled a decline in fiction sales, so many people saw a causal relationship. By the early 80s, the only way you could make a living at fiction writing was to produce soap-opera novels that could easily convert into television mini-series. The serious, professional writers were amateurs and the old form.

So what had he sold the pre-marke-ter, the pre-excerpter, a nine-month Johnny Carson Donahue? It turns on the surface but also on an artistic issue: "good read, your attention.

Most important today and every day in fiction and serious writing are and moral stories. Dickens but novels tend to wallowing in the children of the television: Dallas or Falcon Crest. The artist is usually little interested in what will develop from a line into a "what would then be a fascinating moral and social drama."

Wolfe resists this.

His main ideal is all the ouutside — the ideal — scion of Wall Street, bond trader, as one of the