

William Grattan

A Fight in the Doctor's Office:

Cary Holladay.

Miami University Press, 2009

Winner of the Miami University Press Novella contest, Cary Holladay's *A Fight in the Doctor's Office* is an interesting study of 22-year-old Jenny Hall Havener and her obsession with a 2-year-old deaf black boy. When the story begins, it is 1967, and Jenny is traveling through rural Virginia with her father and mother in their brown Lincoln Continental. This affluent white family is on a "a vacation of sorts," visiting a Hot Springs resort and other Virginia destinations while on the lookout for Jenny's husband, Spalding, a scientist who has fled the Halls' Capitol Hill townhouse. Married just three months, Jenny and Spalding had met at the Library of Congress, just the place, Jenny figured, for "finding a smart husband." The author makes it clear that Jenny has not married for love, but from a vague sense of boredom, since her friends have already begun to raise families.

While looking for an old historic hotel in the small town of Glen Allen, Jenny leaves the car and encounters the young black boy, Benjamin, and his great-grandmother outside a run-down "shack" on a country road. She learns that the great-grandmother, Hattie, cares for the boy with her husband, Woodrow. "He's the cutest baby I've seen in my whole life," coos Jenny, who hands the woman several folded bills and instructs her to buy the boy "something he needs."

Jenny is so smitten by Benjamin that she decides to remain in Glen Allen, abandoning her family and her search for Spalding. To the reader's surprise, her parents offer little resistance to her impulsive move. In fact, her father gives her the Continental ("We'll just take the train home and buy a new one") and, for housing, buys her a long-shuttered store, called BUY TRADE SELL, that used to deal in pianos, coffins and

carousel animals. Though comical, this may strike readers as too convenient and far-fetched, but we soon become captivated by Jenny's new mission, the rescue of Benjamin from his poor great-grandparents.

She will accomplish her mission by spending money on the family, lots of money. What the family needs, she believes, are a TV, the finest coffee and fresh milk, turkey and fresh vegetables. When Jenny fails to detect a telephone in the house, she vows to buy them a "princess phone." When she notices Woodrow hand-writing a note, Jenny tells herself that she will buy monogrammed stationery, a Cross pen, and a Smith-Corona typewriter. Of course she buys Benjamin scads of presents, many of which—a tricycle, a swing set, a puppy—Hattie refuses to accept. "This is too much extra," Hattie argues. "He a baby." Throughout the novella Jenny persists in her belief that material goods will improve the family's life and, in the end, win Benjamin's favor.

But Jenny's materialism is far from her only faulty thinking. By setting Jenny's sheltered existence against rural, small town Virginia, the author exposes all of the heroine's misconceptions. When it comes to blacks, Jenny is a stereotyper extraordinaire. Time and again, we see her draw the wrong conclusions about Hattie and Woodrow. She figures they must use an outhouse, too poor to afford a bathroom (their house does include one). She assumes that all blacks are regular church-goers: "They're supposed to spend their whole day worshipping, and Sunday nights too, plus Wednesday nights, singing hymns and calling out to Jesus, egging on their preacher as he gets worked up and wild." Inventing an entire life for Benjamin's absent mother, Jenny presumes that she must have abandoned her son, eager to leave confining small town life: "...in a flash Jenny perceives a fly-by-night father, a teenage mother laughing in a juke joint, in a low-cut red dress and gold earrings, a young woman ashamed of the wood stove and the decent countrified old people, hungry for high times and fortune." (Benjamin's mother is, in fact, dead).

When her imagination is not busy conjuring misconceptions about Hattie and her family, Jenny indulges in secret plots

to spirit Benjamin from their decrepit house. After discarding several plans, she schemes to remove Benjamin on the pretext of taking him, by herself, to a Richmond ear specialist who can diagnose and cure his deafness. But Hattie foils Jenny's plan, agreeing that Benjamin should see the doctor and announcing that she will take a day off from work (she cleans churches) to accompany them. This sets up the climactic fight of the book's title: "She (Jenny) lands a slap on Hattie's face, then a good hard punch on Hattie's arm. Hattie releases Jenny's hair but wrenches Benjamin away. Jenny screams his name as he slides out of her hold. She knots her fingers into his shirt, but Hattie is right there in her face, reeking of sweat and starch and rage, clawing at Jenny's hands, her voice a hiss...."

While the reader has been waiting for Jenny's comeuppance, it is hard not to feel empathy for her. We recognize that her feelings for Benjamin represent the first time she has felt true love. We may feel saddened by the outcome of the fight, but it is a sadness that turns to hope as Jenny resolves to become more independent.

At times, Holladay is heavy-handed in her story-telling. At one point, Jenny falls asleep in one of the coffins still housed in Buy Trade Sell, only to be rescued by a neighbor girl. Jenny observes her birthday on the day she falls for a local handyman and then pictures a life with him and Benjamin in Richmond. In the final chapter, an optician's diagnosis telegraphs to the reader that Jenny has not been "seeing" well.

Despite the minor flaws, Holladay, a Memphis-based writer with four previous books, delivers all the delights of the novella form: a stripped-down plot and sustained focus on one character, economical narrative, and taut and lyrical prose. She is masterful in handling point of view, employing a limited third person, except in the novella's middle chapter, which is told from the perspective of the neighbor girl, who conveys to the reader the town's feelings about Jenny. The present-tense narration serves to accentuate Jenny's short-sightedness and need for quick gratification. All in all, *A Fight in the Doctor's Office* is a quirky novella that packs a wallop in its dramatic climax.