

Take Me For A Ride

Christine Ianieri reviews *Venus of Chalk*, the latest novel by Susan Stinson



Susan Stinson's latest novel, *Venus of Chalk*, is a slim volume about a fat woman named Carline and her unlikely trip back to the memories and ghosts of her childhood summers in Chalk, Texas. Like a flood of juice from a seemingly innocuous pear, *Venus of Chalk* is sweet with details, fleshy and surprising. I was intrigued from the very beginning, beguiled by Susan Stinson's facility with language and images.

Carline is as vivid and puzzling as your vision of anyone you might know and love. That is, she feels real in a beautifully crafted kind of way. She has her moments of insanity integrated into her sensible sense of her self. Her relationship with her girlfriend, her job, her cat and apartment are left behind when she accepts an unusual ride to Texas to see her Aunt Frankie. She goes to comfort her aunt, who has just lost a close friend. She goes to escape her own life and the violations that intrude upon her within its mostly comfortable boundaries. She goes to take advantage of an adventure offered. She goes to feel the wind and dust of Texas on her skin and in her lungs again. She goes for all and none of these reasons. Why do we do the things we do?

I am filled with gratitude to Susan once again for an introduction to a character whose life situation does not require me to grit my teeth and overlook all the ways in which I can't relate. I love the rare read that actually includes aspects of my fat, queer life as the everyday existence from which revelations spring. Even so, Carline's experience, and this book, is anything but mundane.

The story begins with an unexpected journey, takes an unexpected turn when Carline departs from the bus ride, and

continues to turn us around with twists that reveal the depth beneath each character's skillful portrait. Susan knows how to avoid the pitfalls of romanticized fable, handling simple events, revelations and transgressions with grace and exacting language. Her images are clear, visual and tactile, like being there, only more beautiful.

Susan is a poet with a novelist's temperament. Her words pull at me to take a second look, slow down my reading until I am perusing carefully. Susan invites her reader to stop, read that phrase again, consider the unexpected loveliness and poignancy of her view. I was reminded of the way Annie Proulx quietly shook me out of complacency in *The Shipping News*, let me know to pay attention, this isn't just any family story, even if it is.

And in case you need to hear it explicitly, this is a book about being fat, about loving and hating fat, about living in a fat body and a fat soul, loving fat women, carrying around a fat Venus with a hole in her belly. Integral to Carline's experience, to Susan's voice, and to my welcoming this beautiful book into my life, is the deft portrayal of a woman telling her truths within a fat sphere.

Like the half-trance experience of looking for treasures within a crowded estate sale display, I found myself curious and wondering as I finished this book. Susan Stinson lays out the dust and rust of family relationship side by side with their jewels. Carline's visit home, her aunt's loss, her companions' dreams, all are transformed by secrets in plain sight, and the gentle way grief and love wash away dust for a brief time.

