

🌀 A QUILTBAG, in More than One Sense

Fierce Family, edited by Bart R. Leib, Crossed Genre Publications, 2014, 168 pp., \$11.95.

reviewed by Caren Gussoff

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As a writer—and reader—I immediately give any anthology including stories that speak to and about the experiences of diverse peoples and that portrays underrepresented characters in speculative fiction points simply for existing. That gave *Fierce Family* a leg up in my esteem, in spite of its slightly low-rent looking cover treatment (judging books by cover: I cop to doing this, and while the cover image is quite nice, the typography and layout scream first time self-publisher to me).

The anthology is not, of course, self-published at all—Crossed Genre Press’s parent magazine has been around for just about five years, and the press has published, by the time of this review, at least eight book-length works. Crossed Genre has established, during this time, much goodwill for its inclusive, if not for its uneven, tastes, and for its dedication to finding and publishing stories starring protagonists of color, who are queer (in sexuality, identity, and/or gender), or are otherwise ignored in genre fiction. And *Fierce Family*, with its theme of QUILTBAG families—healthy families—in speculative fiction, is a prime example of Crossed Genre’s mission. It’s also an example of the press’s inconsistent quality.

None of the stories are bad. Some just feel rough, unfinished...like incomplete thoughts. The opening story, “Dinkley’s Ice Cream,” by Effie Seiberg, sets up a fine, fantastic premise—ice cream that literally makes you relive childhood memories—but cuts short the story with a big change that the main character has not yet earned. It’s a disappointment, since the character herself, a strong, single mother of a rambunctious and well-drawn daughter, could truly deserve the happy ending—we just never get a chance to engage long enough to watch her grow.

Stephanie Lai’s “Form B: For Circumstances Not Covered in Previous Sections,” is another piece that feels

unfortunately unfinished. Again, the premise is an excellent one, following an insurance adjuster processing claims in post-apocalyptic Australia, and how personal tragedy moves her to connect with the world’s suffering in more than an abstract, professional way. But the pace is rushed, and much is told rather than shown in the second half, and there are, seemingly, careless contradictions left in.

I’m struck, in some of the other stories, by how one of the two critical elements—non-nuclear/queer/alternatively-identified families, and speculative elements—feel tacked on, as if the characters could be from any sort of family, or the actions did not need to take place in the future/in space/using magic. Rather than being a true intersection of spec and healthy, happy, fierce families, it feels like existing stories were jury-rigged to fit the theme.

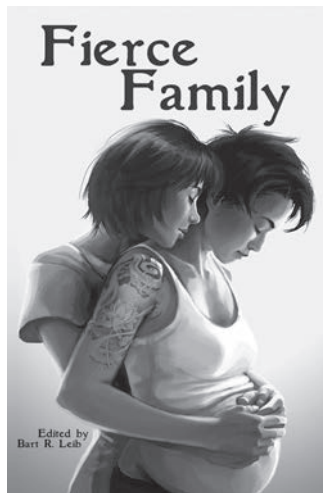
In A.C. Buchanan’s “Growth,” for example, on the earthlike planet Glar, a human colony’s flawed assumptions about the nature of their new home unfold through the eyes of a teenager. The teen is smart, observant, and, we are told, identifies as both male and female. Their gender identity is also supported by their lesbian moms. However, the gender queerness and family of two mothers is, at no point, central to the plot of the story, and does not affect the character’s reactions, knowledge, or dealing with the titular “growths” that gestate inside them. I can make a longwinded point, after reading, that there is statement going on by placing a pregnancy inside a character who identifies as both male and female—but that is the academic in me. There’s no indication that this was done on purpose.

There are standouts, of course: Rick Silva’s “The Home Study,” with its clever “inter-dimensional” adoption, portrays the nontraditional family both as character and as metaphor; “Mission: Extraction,” by Mina MacLeod, is a tight little space opera with a bad-ass QUILT-



BAG family behind the controls; and “Stormrider,” by Layla Lawlor, which suffers from the tacked-on family element syndrome, but which is so exciting, so beautifully written, and so engaging, it’s easily my personal favorite, and I am willing to blow off the tenuous-at-best need for the main character to be in love with another man.

As an editor, Leib did an excellent job of representing a wide continuum of families and of subgenres. Stories run the gamut from fantasy to hard sci-fi, and there is a nice variation in the arrangements of each family unit. Leib also carefully arranged the stories in the volume, ensuring that the anthology itself maintained a pace of its own, and that types of story were distributed evenly throughout. *Fierce Family* failed to deliver on its promise of consistently fierce families in speculative worlds. But while the uneven quality of the anthology dragged it down, the integrity of its vision buoyed it up.



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On Angela Davis’s *An Autobiography* (Cont. from p. 7)

working like animals during the cane season. Many of them would end up having to cut off a finger with the machete for a little insurance money to make ends meet a little while longer.

The job of cutting cane had become qualitatively different since the revolution. No one was a cane-cutter *by trade* any longer; during the cane season everyone pitched in. Also profits for others were not being squeezed from their sweat and toil. They knew that the returns from sugar sales abroad would be used to raise the standards of the Cuban people as a whole—new schools would be built, more hospitals constructed; child care centers would multiply, better housing would be available to those who had the greatest need.

Even so, this Cuban said, the business of cutting cane was work not

fit for human beings; it made you old before your time. He continued to do it because he knew that he was working for the day when his sons and their children would not have to work under the sweltering sun. Mechanization of the entire industry was on the agenda, but the rapidity with which it could be put into operation depended on the sacrifices they were all willing to make.

In this way he subtly criticized me for having romanticized something which was really nothing more than terribly hard work. It was then that I began to realize the true meaning of underdevelopment: it is nothing to be utopianized. Romanticizing the plight of oppressed people is dangerous and misleading.

My favorite section of the book, which has remained with me since the time I first read it around twenty-five years ago, is a passage that speaks, eloquently and via pointed imagery, of privilege and poetical self-seduction, and the grinding work of making a better world or merely a better evening.

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