

Allison Baggio's *In the Body*: Review

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I've read a lot of short story collections over the past year and I wondered why Canadian authors are so preoccupied with abbreviated tales, straggling behind our exalted writer, Alice Munro.

Maybe some Canadian writers feel too constrained to imagine the bigger picture, a plot that runs at least 350 pages: a lengthy fiction with a hero/heroine, one or two nasty people, sadness, happiness, difficulty and a dazzling conclusion that leaves the reader hoping for more. Isn't that what J.K. Rowling did for kids?

Then I thought about it again. A book of short stories is like a photo album, I began to realize, offering different moments in time, different perspectives, a multitude of characters.

So I began Allison Baggio's *In the Body*, happily to discover this assortment of short stories is one of the most audacious books I've read this year.

My favorite, "Possessed," is about a middle-aged man who receives a heart transplant. Ken, who has received this new organ, begins to feel the donor's heart rebelling — it didn't really want to be transplanted in his body.

"I'm pretty sure my new heart hates me," the story begins. "It was supposed to be a gift. My wife and I cried when we got the phone call that I was going to have another chance at life. But now, I am getting the distinct feeling that this new organ beating inside my body wishes it were still nestled under the ribs of its original owner."

It isn't that the heart hates him, Ken believes, it's just that it loved its former owner. Too well.

Baggio can take mundane experiences and push them beyond expected parameters into the surreal. This is the case in another story, "Losing Him," about a married couple who are, shall we say politely, corpulent. "But after nine years together, nine years of eating sundaes drenched in caramel, lying too long in the bed, and skipping the after-dinner walk, Harry's body staged a revolt."

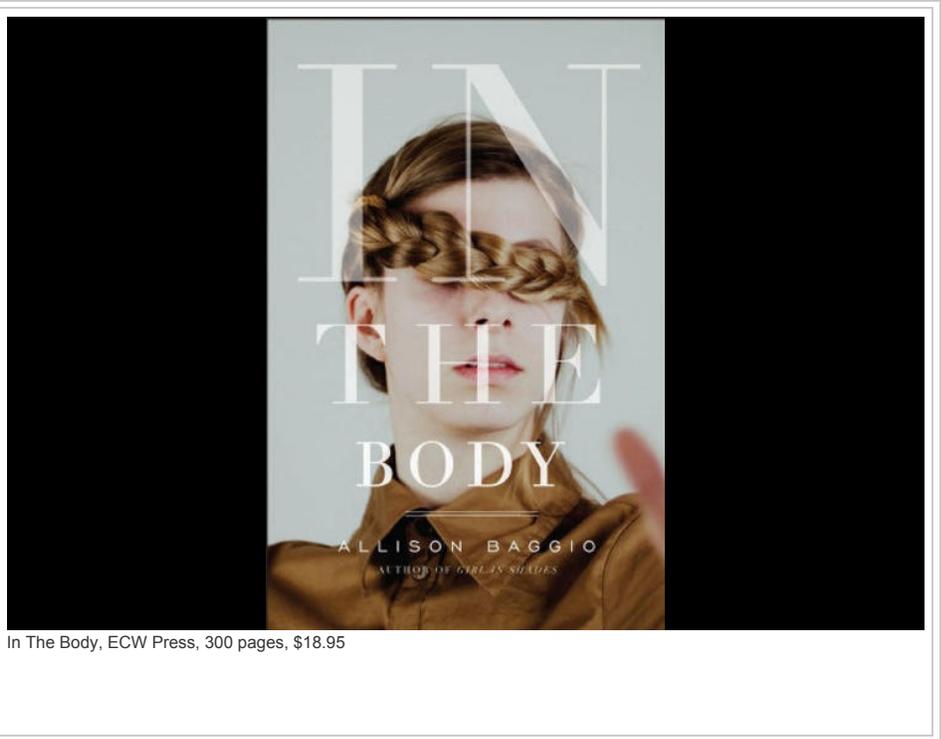
Harry needs gastric bypass surgery and as he began to shed pounds, his wife Gladys, who kept her rolls of flesh intact, feels their marriage is failing. Here she is, as the nursery rhyme goes, the prototypical wife of a Jack Sprat. A woman who could eat no lean. I won't give the plot away but it is a surprising, heartwarming story.

Baggio takes on all sorts of characters: a child whose parents have split, a young American man who has been drafted, a woman who feels she is so ugly no-one can love her.

But there is sense that nothing these characters do should be taken too seriously. I often need a good laugh or even a brief giggle as I am reading so I look forward to Baggio's next book. Maybe she'll become a modern Henry Fielding flinging us from one whacky adventure to the next, giggling as the character finds herself in outrageous scrapes. We'll have to wait and see. Baggio is too good a writer to attempt only one genre.

*Clarification: This article has been edited from a previous version that said Baggio will hopefully write a novel at one point. In fact, Baggio's debut novel *Girl in Shades* came out in Oct. 2011.*

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In The Body, ECW Press, 300 pages, \$18.95