

Isabel Out of the Rain

by Catherine Gammon
San Francisco: Mercury House
\$18.95 (hb), \$10.95 (pb), 199 pp.
Reviewed by Rane Arroyo

*From The Pennsylvania
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What Samuel Beckett achieves in so many of his works through the exploration of "absence," Catherine Gammon in *Isabel Out of the Rain* also achieves but through presence, accumulation, excess. I am always suspicious when someone describes a work as poetic, always wondering why then the work isn't a poem. Gammon manages to be poetic, while never sacrificing the story at the center of Isabel's (and thus the reader's) voyage from out of the rain, into safety, and then back out into a changed world.

Each chapter of this novel offers us a new perspective of Isabel and the men in her company. The chapters overlap at times, and at other times they offer white space, as if the narrative is incapable of filling all the moments. Gammon is aware that she is a storyteller, so her decisions have ramifications that influence her readers. Russell, Santana and Cheyenne are three characters that I will never forget; they each have been *dignified into* their own voices, their own versions of life on this surprisingly dangerous planet.

It is difficult to select passages that best reflect Gammon's achievement, because they are so plentiful. I offer the following as an example of a portrait of stillness:

Standing in the window, keeping watch like a sentinel, Russell tells himself he feels nothing. In the street the rain comes down, hot and tropical, the orange glow like science fiction, airplane lights in the sky. It wasn't always like this, he thinks. He hasn't always been like this. He was in love once. At some time in his life he must have been in love. (149-150)

I am struck by this quiet moment, a moment all readers can easily imagine. I remember standing on a ferry boat between San Juan and Bayamón in Puerto Rico. A lover had left me, going back to his fiance, and I was riding back and forth, afraid to touch land again, afraid of my old life not waiting for me. Gammon's expertise in creating Russell's pathos is in the way that she empowers details over sentimentality to tell her tale, which touches me.

In direct contrast, here is a different sort of passage: Santana finally speaks of war.

"I hid under the bodies," he said. "I hid myself under the bodies. I was covered in mud and blood. I took some tags off a broken torso and buried my own in the bloody mud. Everything was clear to me. Do you understand? It was clear, it was night, lit by flares, or maybe it was the moon, or maybe just death, maybe it was all the death in there, the ghosts rising. I was clear in my mind. Every action was clear. I muddied my face and my name. I bandaged my head and muddied and bloodied it. I bandaged my leg. I made myself look like the walking wounded. I was the walking wounded but I didn't know it. A chunk of my arms was gone and I didn't even know it. (81)

The scene continues until Santana walks away and the world becomes, "Quiet." At the heart of this startling novel is a search for inner quiet and peace, a Herculean task in our postmodern society. I remember asking my cousin Jorge about Vietnam and he just opened his arms to Heaven. He still hadn't made sense of it, or his life afterwards, in Chicago.

In the novel, Isabel's strategy for achieving this quietness in the soul is to change her life story over and over again each time she tells it. Her life is a constant draft, a revision tested upon the audience of Russell and Cheyenne (and the readers). Gammon's heroine, for I've come to think of her as a heroine, is at times so fragile, ephemeral and light (as in weight, physical weight) that she constantly surprises as she reveals herself to be tough, focussed and in control of what little can be controlled in this crazy life.

In the following early passage in the novel, Isabel offers Russell an explanation:

He didn't ask why she'd left then. He'd heard too many explanations already. Isabel's stories changed. He didn't want to know anymore. He thought he didn't have to...

"I dreamed about her," she said. "[Mother] was standing in a kitchen next to a plate-glass wall. Water beat against it. It was a room on a body of glass, immersed in water. The tide rose halfway up the glass. Outside it was night. The

water was black, like ink. My mother had called me. She's said *Look, our first hippopotamus*. (42)

This elliptical passage is an example of why I evoked Samuel Beckett at the very first. Beckett's characters, from *Waiting for Godot* to *Ohio Impromptu*, increasingly grow silent and each word is extraordinarily charged with meaning. Beckett's was a universe where the cosmic fires were burning out, as codified in the expression: "I can't go on, I'll go on."

In contrast, Gammon is writing closer to the time of creation: fire, rain, lightning, animal violence, sexuality, mud and blood. Her characters find words almost too easily available. So they tell stories; so they take in details. At the heart of this novel is the enigmatic Cheyenne, a sexy and dangerous Sam Shepherd-like character. He is the little boy who insists the Emperor has no clothes; for to him nakedness is sex, birth and death. Cheyenne also can't go on, but does go on. His fate and the fate of the others of this novel is only understood in retrospect, by charting the previous day's progress or regression. As Cheyenne says, "You get your life changed around and where you are?" (71)

I have rarely praised a work of fiction like I must now praise *Isabel Out of the Rain* by Catherine Gammon. I've avoided speaking of the plot, afraid of reducing it to a simple tragedy of two brothers, a man and a runaway girl caught up in murder and possible incest. The first chapter of this novel is so frightening that it must be the Art that the Romantics hoped would be their heirs; only, they never envisioned Pain and Wisdom having their own aesthetics and agenda.

Upon finishing the novel, a memory returned to me from some abyss: "I was a child. A thunderstorm woke me up. I somehow managed to go outside. The rain felt cold, as if Heaven was indeed a far distance from Earth. I cupped my hands until a pool of water was captured. I drank it. I felt like I had swallowed the sky." That's how this novel made me feel upon finishing it: I had swallowed the sky.



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BOOK REVIEW

The Orphans of Society's Storm

By CAROLYN SEE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Because it is difficult to understand, difficult to follow, and because rational thought is the last thing on its mind, it might be easy to dismiss "Isabel Out of the Rain," especially because it's a first novel. But that, I think, would be a mistake.

It's always a puzzle about hardcover books and who buys them: who are the people with the \$20 (in this case you have a choice of the \$10 paperback as well) who will plunk their money down for any book? Novels are probably most often bought as presents. Who needs this book as a present?

By answering that deceptively banal question, it's possible to put this novel into focus, into its proper niche.

Young women who have had hideous childhoods need this. Females who—having little wealth and no stability—have substituted arcane learning and a pervasive sense of style as their ways of getting through the days and nights, will love and cherish this book.

Young women whose parents drink, who refuse, in the ongoing scheme of things to get *older*, to become adult, to take care of their children. Young women whose fathers have abused them can certainly use this book. Young women whose mothers are prettier than they are, and have the bad taste to keep on sleeping with very cute men, need this book.

And girls who feel bored and sad and ordinary and strung out and hard up for a drama or a myth to hang their own lives on, need this

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book—to put on their sideboards and their coffee tables, to carry with them to school. Because maybe they too are "Isabel Out of the Rain."

The novel opens with an anonymous woman who picks up a darling guy in a bar. They repair to her room, and three weeks later, after gallons of liquor and quantities of somnambulant sex, she's dead. For these weeks, she has been remembering her childhood, the way it was drenched in alcohol, and that father who abused her.

Then, in a move to another part of the city, we encounter Russell, a man of 40, whose life would have been over, except that a couple of years before, Isabel, a girl of 16, came into a restaurant off the street and offered him sex for food.

He has refrained from taking sexual advantage of her, but brings her home to his lonely apartment and she's been living there ever since. The point here is not that Russell "rescues" Isabel, but that she, with her beauty, her made-up stories, her airmail letters that come to her from all over the world, has rescued Russell from his own dead life.

Russell's past is rooted in Vietnam. When he was a soldier-kid in that war, he had a best friend, Billy Santana. Those boys spent some little time taking women away from each other.

There was Dominique, a French citizen of Saigon, who moved from

Santana to Russell, and then in 1975 a girl named Lucinda, who moved from Russell to Santana.

Beyond that, Russell, who also has one of those drinking, heavily sexual mothers, has a young half-brother, Cheyenne. Russell has deserted Cheyenne, leaving the kid unloved and at loose ends.

Somebody killed that girl back in the prologue. Who was it? Someone out of this crowd is probably Isabel's father. Who is it?

A reader from the mundane world might pose the question how could Isabel's mother allow her to live a gypsy life on New York's streets for years at a time, and how, since life on New York streets is undeniably hard, can Isabel look so good, act so together, do so well, and hold her own with all those guys with exotic names: Santana, Cheyenne, and even Russell (who is usually called Jack)?

The answer is sad. There are thousands of girls whose mothers are still acting out their own adolescent dreams, whose fathers aren't above making a pass at them from time to time, who have grown up in homes drenched in Scotch and redolent of hard drugs.

The best weapon of these girls is to *imagine* themselves out of their problem, to turn their insignificance into significance, to make a *story* out of the chaos they've endured. "Isabel Out of the Rain" is just such a work of the imagination.

And it should be read, cherished, held as a talisman for other young kids, orphaned by our societal storm.

Next: John Wilkes reviews "A Physicist on Madison Avenue" (Princeton University Press).

Gammon, Catherine. *Isabel Out of the Rain.* Apr. 1991. 192p. Mercury House; dist. by Consortium, \$18.95 (0-916515-96-6); paper, \$10.95 (0-916515-97-4). Galley.

[CIP] 90-49383

With urgency this first novel plunges into the despairing psyche of a nameless woman, revealing, through an alcoholic haze, the festering wound left by the worst transgressions of the father. Gammon proceeds to weave a dense pattern of intertwined lives as the reader is swept dizzily in time and place from Saigon to New York, Berkeley to Guatemala and back again. Gritty and compelling, these characters could comfortably inhabit a Sam Shepard play replete with disintegrating families whose lives are consumed by booze or frozen in denial. Isabel, a teenage runaway, has taken refuge with Russell, a stranger who recalls a daughter left behind yet never seen. Their seemingly ordered existence erupts when Cheyenne surfaces with bloodied shirt, memories of murder, and enough drunken rambling to illuminate long-buried secrets. It remains for the enigmatic Santana to appear, embodying those forces which in the end will connect and clarify, unraveling lies. This richly textured portrayal of damaged lives assumes the form of a template, one shaped by the betrayals, the weaknesses of mother and father alike. A template their progeny unknowingly trace, repeating old sins while struggling to recover. —*Alice Joyce*

He loses patience with her and . . . dives through another mirror into other times. What is past here and what is present? In their reality as images all are past, all present. What is embarrassing, ludicrous, trivial, is also as terrible as the huge aircraft tumbling out of the sky as bodies fall away from it.

It is the nature of such montage that it gives equal billing to elements that would not appear equal at all if placed in a more conventional sequence. Shuffled out of sequence how will they be added up to make a story? For an answer one must read each piece nimbly and carefully to see how the author skips through the maze he has so deliberately created and finds the path of discovery to be very much a part of what the whole thing means. There is no cheating of the emotions. The chaos has a specific geometry.

The title story "Success" goes its several ways in several time zones as half brothers fail (or do not quite fail) to find each other. Their father has disproportionately favored one over the other. To all appearances the favored one has lived a considerably more successful life, in terms of self-esteem and in tasting the good things success can offer. Yet, neither envy nor admiration provides a bond. Nothing does. Nothing does—and yet as from far off there is a flashing signal that, beyond doubt or denial, affirms their brotherhood. If there is not exactly an epiphany, there is the mirrored reflection of an epiphany, and that comes to the same thing.

Even in those stories where the narrative chronology is brought close to coherence, the tendency to rely on fast forwards or buck-and-wing slides is pronounced—not something done to fancy-up the relation of real time and memory but something inherent in the essence of lives. "On Silver Skates" whisks back and forth and sideways through parental relationships anchored on the present consciousness of a sad man who has won a bit of fame as a writer of children's books. Once in a time full of happy illusions he had a relationship of mutual admiration with his father. Now he is groping in a futile attempt to reach his son, while he parries the anguishes of a lost woman whose daughter is lost. The speed of the silver skates reflects not only a boyish fantasy but the dismaying velocity of fleeting time.

Two of the stories show men returning to houses known many years ago, and in another a loosely identified couple finds in the woods the remains of a long-crumbled foundation. The search in all of these cases is for life among the ruins—not merely for mementoes but for a vanished life that can be brought parallel with the present to reinforce or reflect it. And in "Trotzky's House" a baffled couple know themselves to be tourists in more than an ordinary sense. They are not only aliens in Mexico and in the barricaded house where

Trotzky was murdered, but also in the shadow of a violence and brutality that seem to be trying to teach them a lesson for which they have no use, but which they cannot quite disown.

Revelations and resolutions come more firmly at the narrative end of some other stories. "Face in the Window" tells of a Prufrockian art historian who has a job leading young American students around Italy as they sniff the treasures of palaces and art galleries. He is nervously aware of the demands of his balancing act. On the one hand he may be fired unless he makes the tour entertaining to the barbarian students. On the other he must not desecrate the splendors he leads them past. He must not concede to Italian friends that American students are viperous slobs. Further yet, he feels an erotic and intellectual inclination toward one of these slobs. Enough to say here that she fixes him. She fixes him good, which is very funny as well as hopelessly sad.

Another black comedy is "A Mechanic's Life." In this morality tale an amateur farmer becomes so enamored of a piece of farm machinery that he is presently unable to keep track of what his wife is up to. She is, in fact, leaving him, moving out. Underlying this surface action is the ribald pattern of a triangle, in which the machine plays the role of seductive homewrecker.

And then, overtly ribald for all its elegant slyness, is the tall tale of "Grace Peck's Dog." The bitch in question is a beautiful Doberman with superdog sexual powers. So overwhelming is her capacity for seduction that she wrecks a neighborhood and becomes a North American legend. Not to be missed, as they say. And the constant fiddling with narrative commonplaces is nowhere to be confused with eccentricity or quirkiness. Though Masters likes to shoot at targets out of sight, his arrows ricochet around corners and strike home.

— R. V. CASSILL

Isabel Out of the Rain

By Catherine Gammon, *Mercury House*

Catherine Gammon's haunting first novel opens with a short story in which a woman picks up a younger man in a bar, and, after a brief relationship, is brutally murdered. The story's third-person journal-like entries include an account of a nightmarish spree of sex, alcohol and violence, and memories of abuse in the protagonist's childhood. A grim and innovative narrative, the piece provides a preface of sorts for the bleak tale of psychological and emotional abuse that follows.

In the longer narrative, Russell Jackson, who works at Bloomingdales and struggles against a nagging ennui, leaves a restaurant one night to find a beautiful teenage girl standing in the rain, "barefoot and shivering and offering herself for a slice of bread." Moved by her beauty

and a strange familiarity, he buys her a meal and offers her refuge in his Brooklyn loft. Her name is Isabel, and her mysterious appearance, "like an angel in a movie sent to save him from despair," grows into a prolonged obsession for Russell. She settles in with her leather scraps, feathered earrings and playing cards retrieved from wet sidewalks, spinning stories to hide her true identity, all the while receiving secret air letters from cities around the world. Russell's confused desire for this girl young enough to be his daughter soon becomes a tormenting fear that she will leave him.

When his younger half-brother, Cheyenne, whom he hasn't seen in years, arrives unexpectedly at his apartment, Russell's past—his disjointed family, Vietnam, two failed marriages—emerges in a climactic reel of revelations. With these revelations we learn it is not mere fate that has brought Russell, Isabel and Cheyenne together. At the cross-roads of their intersecting histories is Billy Santana, an eccentric drug dealer and Vietnam deserter from Russell's Saigon and Berkeley days.

The story unfolds in a seemingly endless rain, and a foglike aura suffuses the narrative, blurring time and memory. Gammon's prose accumulates in a sustained intensity of voice—a voice steadily unscrambling a nightmare: "There are patterns here, mysteries he doesn't understand. When Cheyenne and Isabel come in, he turns around, willing himself to meet his brother, to hold out his hand. He is stopped by what he sees: Isabel waiting at the door, Cheyenne coming forward, and in the interval between them, visible magic."

Gammon's attention to detail is acute, and the oppressiveness in the lives of her characters is palpable. In the chapters set in Saigon, she realizes with great effectiveness the disturbing sensory and psychological assault of a city steeped in poverty, crime and the violent confusion of war. Spun-out sentences map the city's streets: ". . . each little slum snaking out through the human backwash of squatters and refugees from the countryside and the chronic urban poor, until it ran up against a canal, hesitated, and, leaping it like flames leaping a fire trail, spread out again on the other side into another backside world."

While the novel's urban intelligence and emotional intensity are among its strengths, the characters' heightened self-awareness and the prolonged sense of confusion and mystery sometimes exhaust. The rain, a somewhat redundant metaphorical motif, adds to an unrelenting urban gloominess in which mystery seems hopelessly married to meaninglessness.

But *Isabel Out of the Rain* is a compelling and ambitious first novel, if an unhappy one. Alone and trapped in their private and shared worlds, the characters struggle both to evade and unravel their identities, drawing us with them into their pain.

— SARA LONDON

garion, the Child of Light, racing to his cataclysmic and long-prophesied meeting with Zandramas, Child of the Dark, which will determine the future of the world. His small band—consisting of, among others, his wife, Ce'Nedra; members of his shape-changing family; and his former enemy, Zakath, Emperor of Mallorea—is joined by Cyradis, the blind seeress of Kell, who is foreordained to decide which will win, the forces of Light or those of Dark. From the mysterious city of Kell they are directed to Perivor, bastion of chivalry, where they will learn the location of the meeting place, Korim, the Place Which Is No More. After various adventures and encounters with Zandramas's agents, the final battle of wills is joined, with Belgarion becoming privy to astonishing revelations about some of his companions. This volume is not for a newcomer to Eddings's series; while it ties up loose ends and brings the hero and his friends to a happy conclusion, the meeting that the previous four books have been foreshadowing is anticlimactic. (May)

PAPERBACKS

FICTION ORIGINALS

YELLOW STREET

Veza Canetti, translated by Ian Mitchell. New Directions, \$10.95 ISBN 0-8112-1160-6; cloth \$18.95 -1159-2

This novel, written by the late wife of Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti, who contributed the foreword, was originally serialized in 1932-1933 in a leading Viennese newspaper, the *Arbeiter Zeitung*. It portrays the people of Yellow Street, the leather merchants' row in Vienna. "It's a remarkable street. . . . All sorts of people live there, cripples, somnambulists, lunatics, the desperate and the smug." There is Runkel, the crippled woman who runs her shops with a tight fist; she is hated for her parsimony, but she wants to be recognized as human, not as a monster. Herr Iger beats his wife and deprives her of food and clothing, yet is known publicly as a great philanthropist and a charmer of the ladies. Emilie, an unemployed servant girl, learns that she can improve her lot by feigning suicide by throwing herself into the Danube. These and many other characters are created deftly and sparsely; in a few lines Canetti tells volumes about human nature. She provides a fascinating window on her era replete with vivid details of daily life, as well as an ageless story of the struggle to maintain dignity during hard times. (Apr.)

ISABEL OUT OF THE RAIN

Catherine Gammon. Mercury, \$10.95 ISBN 0-916515-97-4; cloth \$18.95 -96-6
Russell takes Isabel in "like a lost kitten." He's 37, she's 14. He loves her, sometimes desires her, believes she was fated to come to him. This vague presentiment becomes unnervingly concrete when Isabel says that their meeting was no accident—he is her father. Or is he? Isabel tells many stories (not lies, according to Russell's distinction: "A lie is not a story. Somewhere in a story the truth is concealed"). She is a mystery that Russell must solve. Her past is somehow connected with his own and with his friend from the Vietnam war, the powerful, mayaworshipping Billy Santana, who stole Russell's wife and took her to live in Guatemala. A murder frames the novel, and Russell's brother, Cheyenne, seems guilty. Oddly enough, he, too, knows Isabel. Gammon crafts a solid psychological mystery with Oedipal undercurrents that arise from a mist of confusion and nightmarish flashbacks—of Vietnam, of sexual abuse—becoming clear only at the finish. Sometimes the prose in this first novel is thick, asking more questions than it answers. But the conclusion strikes with force owing to its stealthy, veiled approach. (Apr.)

MURDER IN WRIGLEY FIELD

Crabbe Evers. Bantam, \$3.95 0-553-28915-2

"Dream" Weaver, ace pitcher of the Chicago Cubs, is shot dead in the tunnel leading from the field to the Cubs' clubhouse, before the start of a game. The killer vanishes, and police are baffled. The list of suspects grows as Dream's unsavory private life is unearthed. Could the killer be one of Dream's many jilted girlfriends? A jealous boyfriend or husband (a category that includes several teammates and Cub executives)? One of the gamblers or drug suppliers who gravitated toward the pitcher? Duffy House, a retired sportswriter of the old school, is called upon by the commissioner of baseball to investigate *sub rosa*. With his beautiful niece, Petey, who is about to enter law school and shares her dear "Unk"'s love of baseball, House follows trails that lead to an exciting after-innings finish in Wrigley Field. Evers uses many apt baseball metaphors, writes in hardboiled tradition (" 'Lila, it's been too long,' I said, taking her digits and feeling the current.") and employs familiar baseball names from the past, such as Cubs manager Freddie "Bonehead" Merkle. This is the first of three baseball mysteries by the pseudonymous Evers scheduled to be released during the 1991 season. (Apr.)

MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER: Stories by Women

Edited by Irene Zahava. Crossing, \$9.95 ISBN 0-89594-464-2; cloth \$21.95 -465-0
Zahava, in a follow-up to *My Father's Daughter: Stories by Women*, compiles these short stories, excerpts and memoirs by contemporary women reflecting mother-daughter relationships. Rebellion, misunderstanding and spitefulness play major roles, as do growing up, pregnancy and the sometimes startling signs of aging. Standouts include Louise Erdrich's vivid "The Leap," in which a daughter remembers how she was given life not just once but three times by her mother, a former trapeze artist; Barbara Kingsolver's "Islands on the Moon," in which a woman's initial embarrassment at her mother's eccentricities turns to recognition of profound similarities and basic love; and "Uterus" by Linnea Johnson, in which a young narrator describes her South Chicago home, fondness for her 70-year-old mother and anger at her father's infidelity. This collection represents admirably the range of feelings daughters can have for their mothers. But many of the pieces, though affecting, seem to be only fragments. (Apr.)

THE UMBRELLA TREE

Rose Zwi. Penguin, \$6.95 ISBN 0-14-013410-7

In this novella, two white women from Johannesburg—the mother and wife of an imprisoned anti-apartheid activist—drive their black servant to the impoverished village where she lives. There, they share an afternoon of tea and conversation under the umbrella tree. Zwi, a former resident of South Africa, deftly summons up the harsh village climate and introduces memorable characters including the mother, Freda, a plump, radical old Jew who sings Yiddish songs about oppression to her black hosts, and Joseph, a sullen young man who, despite his bitterness toward whites, is moved and inspired by the music. But in stretching the story to more than 100 pages, Zwi (*Another Year in Africa*) does it harm. There are too many characters to track, and the dialogue sometimes seems a rip-off from political pamphlets ("The townships can easily be sealed off by a small detachment of police. You must have the people with you. You can't do it alone."). Told in a more abbreviated form, the same encounter undoubtedly would be more poignant. (Apr.)

LESBIAN LOVE STORIES: Volume 2
Edited by Irene Zahava. Crossing, \$9.95 ISBN 0-89594-462-6; cloth \$21.95 -463-4

Although there are some bright moments in these 30 short stories, the parade of characters ruminating on de-

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Isabel Out of the Rain

By Catherine Gammon
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By Eleanor J. Bader

TO READ CATHERINE GAMMON'S *Isabel out of the Rain* is to enter the world of the manipulated and the manipulating, the hustled and the hustler. It

FICTION

is tense, seedy, creepy stuff, the habitat of the homeless and near-homeless, a land of Vietnam vets both drunk and sober, young rootless girls, incest survivors, murderers and angry souls searching for connections and a way to make sense of the madness and chaos.

There is Billy Santana, a genius-maybe-saint, who seems to arrive in time to ameliorate every conceivable crisis while sharing so little of himself one wonders if he is real or an apparition. There's Russell, a one-time warrior turned passive and isolated, who eventually admits that "all his life he has been numb." Cheyenne, Russell's kid brother, a skinny, vio-

lent, alcoholic would-be recluse looking for an undefined something or someone to heal the enormous hurts that rule his existence, is also part of the scene. And, of course, there's Isabel, the waif-turned-woman around whom much of the novel revolves.

Gammon's writing is intense and spare, evoking a dreamlike state that carries the reader into a trance of sorts. I had to read it slowly, a few pages at a time, in order to absorb the complex situations and emotions presented. Some of it reads like poetry; other areas of the book ring loudly with political truths and interesting ideas. Take Santana's rumination on his time in Vietnam. "The napalm and the booby traps and the land mines are the will of man, but the mountains and the jungle are realities willed by God. It's God we're making war on."

Gammon also gets into the soul

Creeping and crawling from the wreckage

of the abused child, as Cheyenne, in a particularly lucid moment, recalls his upbringing—the horror and the joy. It is Santana he remembers most fondly, "Santana who took him out of his world when he was a boy, away from his mother, who took him to the zoo and to see the buffalo in Golden Gate Park, who took him to ballgames and movies, who did magic with cards and pulled dimes from his ears, who told him fairy

Novelist Catherine Gammon's writing is intense and spare, evoking a dreamlike state that carries the reader into a trance of sorts.

tales and ghost stories and stories about children he had known in Vietnam—Santana who had helped him with his mother one night when they came in from Tilden Park and pizza on Telegraph Avenue and found her on the living-room floor and had to clean her up—his mother in the bathroom naked, old, worn-out flesh, Santana helping her into the shower and scrubbing her down."

Isabel Out of the Rain is a difficult, sometimes unpleasant book. I did not like the people, the world I was brought into or the feelings that erupted as I slogged through it. I had nightmares inspired by Gammon's prose. Yet, it has stayed with me. Not a day in the last several weeks has been without some thought of Santana, Russell, Cheyenne or Isabel.

In short, Gammon made me care in a day-in-day-out sort of way. And again, it is Santana's words that reverberate. "In Guatemala," he tells his friends, "they say that God blinds those who do not love." It is a rejoinder to hold dear as we navigate the hopelessness and despair that so often threaten to reign. ■
Eleanor J. Bader is a writer living in Brooklyn.