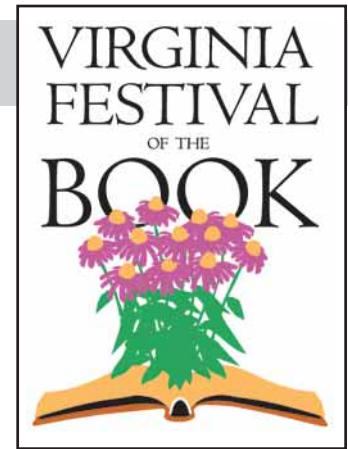


***Gorgeous Lies* by Martha McPhee and *Shelter from the Storm* by Michael Mewshaw recommended by Avery Chenoweth**

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Avery Chenoweth—author of the short story collection *Wingtips*—recommends *Gorgeous Lies* by Martha McPhee and *Shelter from the Storm* by Michael Mewshaw. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss our common heritage.



Although the books *Shelter from the Storm* by Michael Mewshaw and *Gorgeous Lies* by Martha McPhee appear utterly dissimilar, they share nevertheless a remarkable unity in the way they draw the map of our beliefs and desires. Whether in the medium of Islam and Communism, or of Gestalt therapy and marijuana, these two stories trace our need for some kind of belief and a father who embodies this for us. We may all be looking for an ideal father, perhaps, some grand figure who will love and shelter us. For McPhee and Mewshaw, the centrality of the heart's earliest desire for such a father drives their characters to search for him among the thrown pillows and mores of a '60s hippie farm house or the hustlers and carnivores of Central Asia.

And what we get, of course, are two stories which, for all their differences, come into the center with a vivid awareness of the tragic consequences that arise from the hollow heart of the great man. *Gorgeous Lies* is set in a New Jersey farm disguised as Eden, and *Shelter from the Storm* is set in a fictionalized nation disguised as Hell. Each story brings us into a confrontation with a modern kind of terror—the self-anointed egomaniac whose savagery is delicately swathed in the hues of self-concern. McPhee draws the apocryphal time in recent American family life when everything could be reinvented, and the character at the center of this ambition, Anton Furey—Gestalt therapist and philanderer—indulges

in a narcissism writ large with divinity. His will be done, which involves building an experimental community around the guiding force of his personality. Mewshaw shows us the results of a personality cult writ large, with nationalism. This hell is filled with the human shrapnel that has flown loose from the explosion of Communism, thrown, like McPhee's characters, across a landscape of decades.

Gorgeous Lies is McPhee's return to the characters of her first novel, *Bright Angel Time*. We meet Anton again, now on his deathbed, 20 years later. He is the dreamer who builds castles in the air, and lays the foundations on the backs of his wives, lovers and children. His magnum opus on human sexuality may not yet be written in prose, but it is all too well written in the lives of those around him—in the language of emotional incest which, magnanimous man that he is, he is just helpless to refuse himself. The eight sharply drawn children of the first novel diffuse in this sequel, vanishing with subtle intent into the amorphous ego-mass of a family without walls.

Zack McClintock is a security expert whose search for his daughter's kidnapped husband leads him into the turmoil of central Asia, drawn with Mewshaw's delirious acuity. Zack's attempt to fulfill his role as a father, and to find his surrogate, brings him to an aide worker trying to save a feral boy by getting him to America, for

medical help. The camera eye, the microphone ear, and the relentless impact of place all join to fix us within the dusty oxygen and sock-smelling rooms of concrete desolation. The immobility of place and culture is what his characters really struggle with, the fixity of accidents, all of which belies the momentary alliances we create for the good cause.

Whether in the cardiac-flush of a desert at sunset, or in the cardiac flush of a raging bully at the dinner table, the inopportune moments of poignancy that underlie every great story make these two books wonderful explorations of a search that we all know too well.

Virginia Festival of the Book

145 Ednam Drive • Charlottesville, VA • 22903-462
434.924.3296 • vabook@virginia.edu • <http://www.vabook.org>