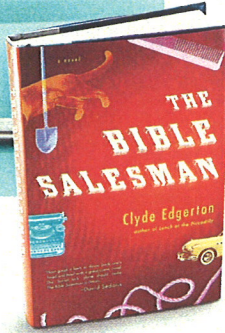


Edgerton's gullible protagonist, Henry



Heaven Help Him!

Good and evil team up in this sweet joyride of a novel

TIRED OF \$4 a gallon gasoline, food riots in poor nations, climate change, the sniping of the presidential race, the subprime mortgage meltdown, and the tangled interconnectedness of all the world's problems? For relief, pick up Clyde Edgerton's new novel, *The Bible Salesman* (Little, Brown), which takes place between 1930 and 1951 in a rural white American South so innocent and self-contained it doesn't include even a hint of racism. Henry Dampier, a 20-year-old Bible salesman, has no troubles beyond his worries about certain inconsistencies in the biblical text and his keen desire to get laid, when he is conned into moving stolen cars by a man named Preston Clearwater, who says he works for the FBI. The plot is a simple clash of good and evil, and the suspense comes from wondering when good—a little dopey, a little too pious—is going to recognize evil. Despite all the Southern Gothic touches—poor Henry has to bury the same dead cat twice—*The Bible Salesman* is really just an escapist romp at heart, perfect for a lazy summer's afternoon. —MICHELE OWENS

THE MONSTERS' BALL

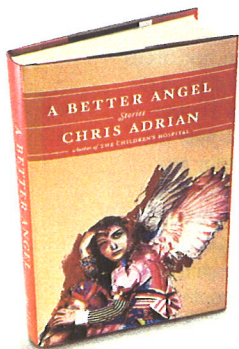
A brilliantly written memoir of possibly the worst parents ever

IN HER LATEST BOOK, *The Three of Us: A Family Story* (Pantheon), Julia Blackburn conjures two of the most narcissistic, drunkenly bombastic characters since *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Unfortunately for her, this poisonous pair—the poet Thomas Blackburn and painter Rosalie de Meric—happen to be her parents. Using the copious journals and letters all three of them kept over the years, Blackburn has written a stunning book, part memoir, part portrait of her parents' generation, brought into focus by her mother's final days. Even at their lowest, there's nothing dull about this trio—the fights are vicious, the taking of lovers voracious, the intelligence sharp. When Tom and Rosalie finally divorce in 1961, when Julia is 12, the rivalry between mother and daughter, latent from the start, bursts into full bloom. Every lodger who shares their house becomes a pawn between them, culminating in the formation of endless triangles and sexual liaisons. It's destructive stuff, but in Blackburn's masterly telling, it's also rawly human, bleakly funny, and insightful. As Rosalie spends the last month of her life living (peacefully at last) with her daughter, other old loves come back into focus and some sort of sense is made of all the crazy years—Blackburn is too smart to offer anything as pat as a happy ending, but she does close this riveting story with an enormous ray of hope.

—ELAINA RICHARDSON

The Best Intentions

SPIRITS AND DEMONS and a persistent faith populate Chris Adrian's crystalline stories in *A Better Angel* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). The title is taken from one story in particular—emotionally daring, as almost all these stories are—where an angel plays a significant role. At the same time, the phrase evokes Lincoln's famous line, which he used to close his first inaugural address in March 1861, appealing to the nation to remain whole: "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." Two years later he would speak at Gettysburg, where 40,000 men were maimed and slaughtered in three days. Thus the title is doubly accurate, because this same haunting dichotomy of intention and reality can be found at work in almost all of Adrian's tales: a woman befriends a boy, inappropriately, it turns out, and he manages to wreck her car; a girl tries to speak to the spirit of her dead father and ends up contacting the devil instead.... That's how it is in Adrian's lyrical kingdom, where most attempts at intimacy, friendship, and love become something more dark, complex, and spiritually wrenching. —VINCE PASSARO



The author, age 10, with her pet bush baby, Congo