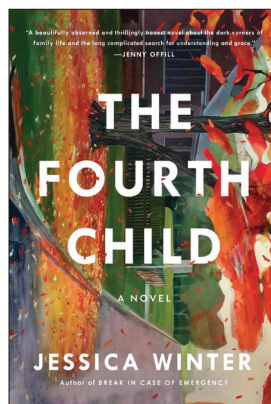


Reviews



The Fourth Child
 JESSICA WINTER '99
 HarperCollins, \$26.99
 Reviewed by Debra Spark '84

A familiar story: a teenager gets accidentally pregnant, marries, and says “so long” to her previous life plans. In Jessica Winter’s second novel, *The Fourth Child*, the young mother is Jane, an ardent Catholic, mesmerized by saints and “suffering that was also salvation.” She marries the father, who is her serious

boyfriend, but the two are unhappy from the start. Lauren, their daughter, “already wanted to be someone else” by the time she enters high school in the 1990s. As for Jane, though she has two more children and remains in the Buffalo of her youth, she considers her marriage “the ficus in the dining room that [she] was occasionally startled to discover was still alive.”

Initially, this domestic drama is at the heart of Winter’s narrative, the first third of which recalls William Trevor’s fiction. The pages are beautifully written yet relentlessly painful, focused on hopes dashed and lives spiraling downward. Then, a big plot move—the arrival of Mirela, an uncontrollable child whom Jane adopts from Romania. The little girl changes the terms of the narrative, shaking up the family and retrospectively revealing the novel’s true subject: the consequences of saving (or failing to save) a child.

From here, the novel’s canvas becomes increasingly broad. Jane steps up her anti-abortion activism, Mirela’s exhausting explosions attract community attention, and Lauren’s school days grow fraught as a guileful drama teacher leads her down a clearly treacherous path. Though Jane’s motives are always pure, in clear contrast to her often enraged husband’s, and though she absorbs advice from D. W. Winnicott and attachment theorists, Jane’s choices fail to heal her family.

In the end, all the novel’s characters, whether pro-choice or pro-life, must confront the catastrophic effects of the pro-life movement: the actions of violent extremists, the psyches of children abandoned in Romanian orphanages as a consequence of Nicolae Ceausescu’s anti-abortion policy, and the lives not lived due to an adulthood that arrives too soon.

Winter is an executive editor at the *New Yorker*. Her most recent articles have addressed parenting conundrums, the anti-abortion movement, predatory men, and the language of domestic violence, all interests that clearly inform this emotionally intense, complex book.

DEBRA SPARK’s most recent books are *And Then Something Happened: Essays on Fiction Writing* and the novel *Unknown Caller*.



Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York
 ALEXANDER NEMEROV '92PHD
 Penguin Press, \$35
 Reviewed by Alexi Worth '86

“Art is cunning,” the abstract painter Barnett Newman wrote in 1957 to his upstart colleague, Helen Frankenthaler, “but it is time you learned that cunning is not yet art.” Frankenthaler, then still in her twenties, had irritated

Newman by arranging to get herself and Newman into a fluffy feature in *Esquire* magazine. The publicity—and the company—evidently didn’t suit the older artist, who threatened a lawsuit, and added some arch, insulting phrases. And yet, far from being rattled, Frankenthaler wrote to a friend that she found his attack “strangely flattering.”

That was Frankenthaler: shrewd, supremely confident, unintimidated by the male art world into which she had dropped, like a tall, beautiful Jewish Athena, after graduating from Bennington in 1949. Her composure more than bears out the title of Alexander Nemerov’s new book, *Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York*, which offers a vivid picture, not only of an important painter’s formative decade, but of the small rivalrous, social world of American painting’s liftoff years.

Nemerov, who taught at Yale for more than a decade before moving to Stanford, is known for his bravura rereadings of earlier American art history, from Raphaele Peale to Frederic Remington, but here his voice is especially unacademic and personal. He refers to Frankenthaler as “Helen” throughout, arguing that he felt he had to “dare closeness.” His descriptions of individual paintings are precise, sympathetic, and often lyrical: “The shaken contours and splattered edges,” he writes of her *Hotel Cro-Magnon*, “bestow the right penumbra of suddenness on all things.”

In his introduction, Nemerov confesses that he hadn’t always been such an ardent Frankenthaler admirer. That same splatter could seem formless and self-indulgent, her “elitist and seemingly apolitical hauteur” off-putting. But Nemerov is hardly the only person to come around. For many younger painters and curators, Frankenthaler’s improvisational staining techniques now seem freshly relevant. Readers who enjoy Nemerov’s accessible, highly sympathetic account will also enjoy Katie Siegel’s *The heroine Paint: After Frankenthaler* (2015), and especially Mary Gabriel’s *Ninth Street Women* (2017) which offers an overlapping yet more comprehensive picture of Frankenthaler and her equally undaunted female peers.

ALEXI WORTH '86 is a painter and writer living in Brooklyn, New York.