

San Francisco Chronicle

BOOK REVIEW

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When life veers into oddity

Role-reversals, political satire in collection of surreal stories

Reviewed by Sarah Coleman

Last summer, a story appeared in the New Yorker magazine called "Miracle," about a white couple's dismay at giving birth to a black baby. Masterly in its suspense, the story took the couple through strange psychological territory, through betrayals and counterbetrayals; its eeriness anchored by believable details about diapering and breast milk. It was one of the magazine's most striking stories in years.

The author of the story, Judy Budnitz, takes human anxieties and overlays them with a surreal twist and a sprinkling of the absurd. Reading Budnitz's stories is like experiencing the exhilaration of flight along with the queasiness of vertigo: She can take you to new heights, but don't expect a comfortable ride.

In "Nice Big American Baby," Budnitz's sparkling second story collection, tension derives from how little characters know

Nice Big American Baby

By Judy Budnitz

KNOFF; 285 PAGES; \$23

about each other, even — or especially — when they're related by blood. Dialogue hovers between jokiness and hostility; it's often hard to tell if someone is mentally unraveling or just having a bad day.

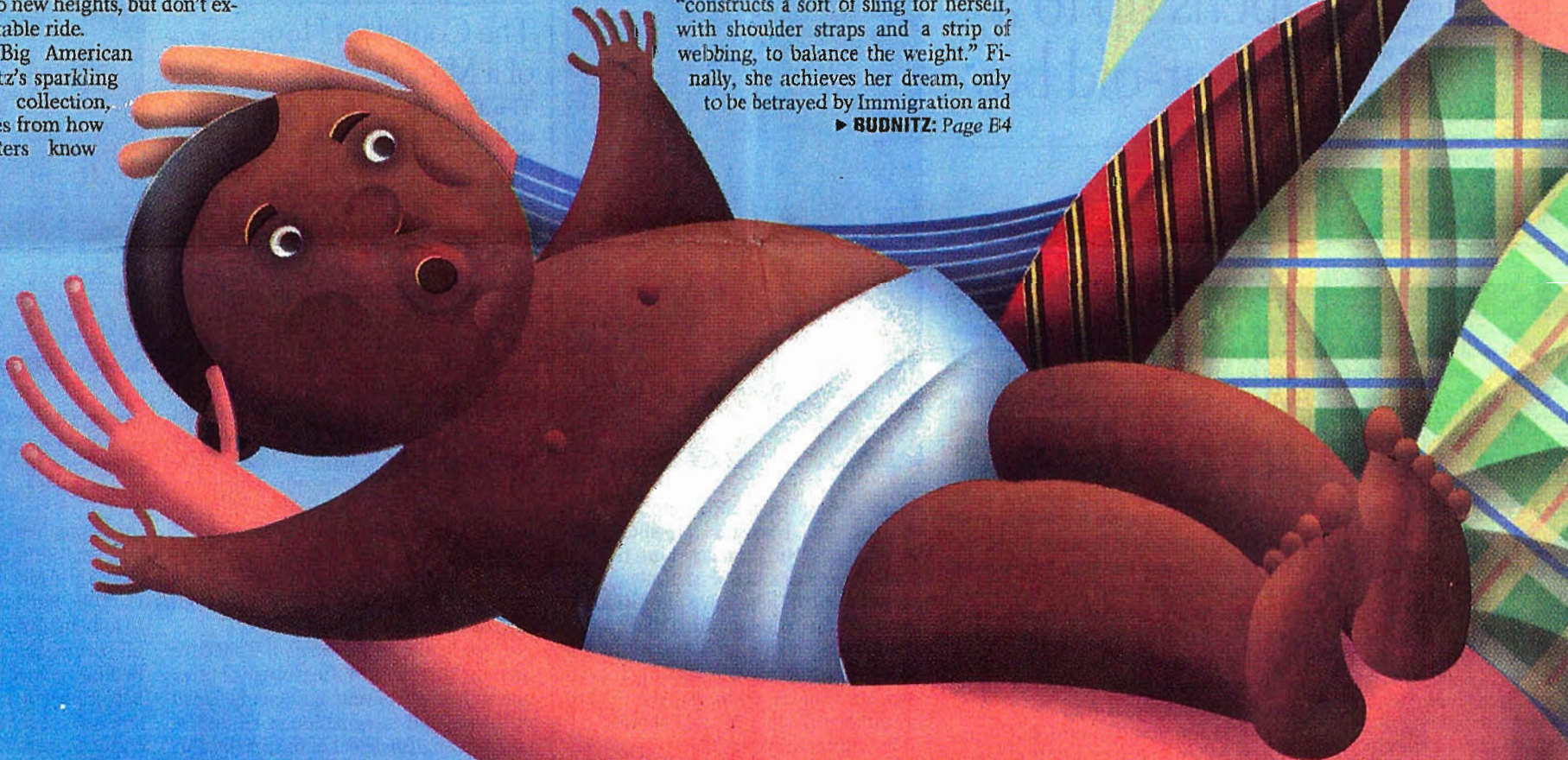
Odd things happen in these stories, but they're always grounded in recognizable emotional territory. In "Flush," a daughter takes a mammogram in place of her fearful mother, who mysteriously disappears in the clinic's bathroom after saying she's seen a giant carp in the toilet. "Visitors" relates a series of increasingly bizarre phone calls between a daughter and her parents, who have lost their way while driv-

ing to see her. As their detours get more and more ominous and surreal, the distraught daughter is left shouting into the phone, "You two come along right now!"

In both of these stories, the events are strange, but the underlying emotions are all too familiar: the dismay of an adult child having to reverse roles with a parent, the parent's desperate need to pretend nothing is wrong. Fantasy and horror merely accentuate the emotional drama.

Other stories have a more political slant. "Where We Come From" is a sly indictment of U.S. immigration practices: It tells of a would-be illegal immigrant named Precious who's so determined to have her baby on American soil that she keeps a fetus in her womb for four years. During this time, she tries over and over to cross the border, and "constructs a sort of sling for herself, with shoulder straps and a strip of webbing, to balance the weight." Finally, she achieves her dream, only to be betrayed by Immigration and

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Offbeat humor and unnerving details

► BUDNITZ

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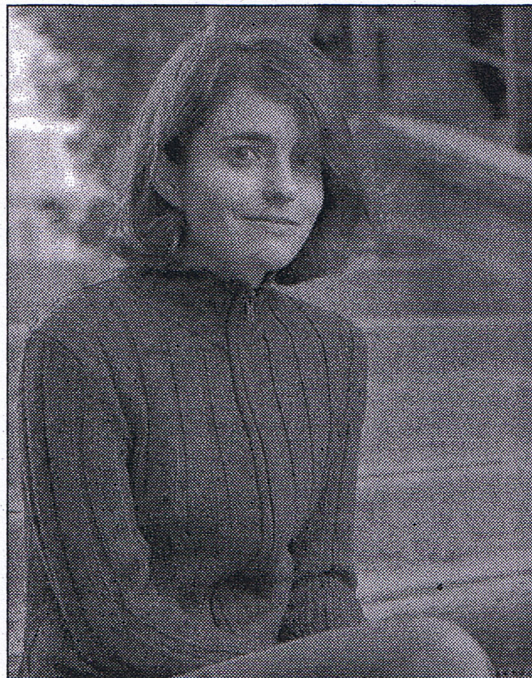
the baby himself, who comes out spouting an American litany: "Give me, I want, I need, I deserve."

In the satirical "Preparedness," a dim-bulb president and his staff devise an emergency shelter system to prepare for the apocalypse. Testing the system, they're outraged to find that people would rather spend their last hours partying than hunkering down in a sweaty tunnel. "I do all I can to take care of you, and what do I get in return?" the president scolds in a televised address. "Nothing but a bad attitude and a lot of ingratitude."

Such stories could feel showy, the attempt of a young writer to prove she's not a one-note wonder, but Budnitz has such mastery over her material, and such a distinctive style, that the stories never feel frivolous. Despite their range of subject matter and genres, the stories share a unique tone that combines offbeat humor, unnerving details and emotional resonance.

There are also three fine period pieces in the collection. In "The Kindest Cut," a deranged Civil War surgeon begins to amputate healthy limbs and plant them in the ground, unwittingly chronicling his own mental breakdown in his journal. "Immersion" takes place in the familiar environs of 1950s suburban America, and provides a kind of inversion of the feel-good race-relation story. In it, a young white girl persuades her polio-infected cousin to swim in a pool that black kids have taken over, a move that uncovers her own capacity for evil.

Occasionally, Budnitz's skill at creating voices and settings gets the better of her storytelling. In "Saving Face," a kind of feminist updating of George Orwell's "1984," the atmospherics are great, but the story meanders for a long time before its loose ends are pulled together in the final third. Still, this is a small price to



JEFF LINNELL

Judy Budnitz

pay for such distinctive, imaginative writing.

In an interview that she gave just after her first short-story collection was published, Budnitz said that she likes to use her imagination because she's still young and doesn't have a huge well of experience on which to draw.

On the evidence of "Nice Big American Baby," one could wish that she would stay forever young. ■

Sarah Coleman is a New York writer.