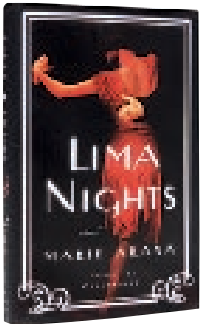


THE "ELLE'S LETTRES" READERS' PRIZE 2009

File this month's fiction round under the heading of "Lost Souls," with its three novels conjuring the fates of tormented lovers and delusional misfits: A steamy tale of tropical tristesse by National Book Award finalist Marie Arana (*American Chica, Cellophane*) ran away with the laurels, and the neck-and-neck runners-up were shadow-tinged portraits of troubled loners by Stacey D'Erasmus (*Tea, A Seahorse Year*) and Los Angeles-based journalist, artist, and debut novelist Nancy Spiller. So it seems love—however doomed—does conquer all.



1. MARIE ARANA *LIMA NIGHTS* (DIAL PRESS)

Arana vividly captures the nonchalance with which Carlos Bluhm, a middle-aged Peruvian of German extraction, embarks on an affair with Maria Fernandez, a 16-year-old tango dancer in 1986 Peru, while his highly cultured blond wife, Sophie, oversees their children's classical music lessons and cares for the family mansion. But when Carlos whisks Maria off on a vacation, concocting a tangled web to cover their tracks, the unthinkable happens. The strength of Arana's narrative lies in that elusive twin achievement all writers strive for: believability and unpredictability.—*Penny Bernal, Encinitas, CA*

While skillfully delving into the upper-class mind of Carlos, Arana doesn't shy away from illuminating the deeply ingrained prejudices that exist toward Indians like Maria. Yet the richness, sensuality, and beauty of Peruvian culture are lost when the story spotlights sexual desire too brightly—and for this story to be truly satisfying, Maria would have needed to possess a more individual voice than that of an impoverished young mistress desiring security.—*Joanne M. Choi, Boston*



2. NANCY SPILLER *ENTERTAINING DISASTERS* (COUNTERPOINT)

A writer dishes about her lavish dinner parties for food magazines; what her readers don't know is that she hasn't hosted a real party in years—the soirees take place only in her head. When an important editor invites himself to one of her legendary events, she panics, obsesses, and seeks a way to get out of it. This may sound like the stuff of chick-lit comedy, but it's not: It's an extended brood on food, love, family, and the exhausting rat race of L.A. This book doesn't have a lot of plot, but it offers sharp, startling observations in a unique and very human voice.—*Susan Jensen, Mesa, AZ*

After a witty start, this story turns deadly serious and veers into *Mommy Dearest* territory as the unnamed narrator recalls her abusive, mentally disturbed mother and the rest of their dysfunctional family. Ultimately, Spiller isn't able to bridge the gap between the chatty pre-party jitters of a hostess and the wrenching melodrama of a traumatized childhood.—*Penny Bernal, Encinitas, CA*



3. STACEY D'ERASMO *THE SKY BELOW* (HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT)

Rich in detail, with expertly spun sentences, this is a novel for connoisseurs of words. As we follow Gabriel Collins' life—the painful departure of his father, the loss of a mother he remembers as creative and attentive, the necessity of fending for himself and his sister—we endure with him his long wait for a coming-of-age that never materializes the way he expects, and we bear witness to the thin line between reality and fantasy. Well into adulthood, Gabriel is beholden to a world he has created in his mind even as he moves through real life and relationships. More than anything, this novel explores the question, If you think something is true, does that make it real?—*Tammy Gardner, Odessa, TX*

Raw and cold, this story portrays the life of a lost boy who turns to drugs and prostitution to fill a void within and grows into a hardened, indifferent man. Unfortunately, the beauty of D'Erasmus's writing almost disappears behind the ugly subject matter of *The Sky Below*, which is graphic, disturbing, and depressing.—*Susan Jensen, Mesa, AZ*