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The Hallucinatory Realism of Rachel Ingalls

In stories both preposterous and profound, Ingalls exposes the tragedy of domesticity.

By Lidija Haas

In Ingalls's vision of intimacy, you're not safe until everybody else is dead.
Illustration by Chloe Cushman

A lonely woman romances a large aquatic creature who's fleeing her town's sadistic scientists. It's the kind of story—a collision of fairy tale, pulp, and the dredgings of the unconscious—that produces an eerie familiarity. Those who flung (unsubstantiated) allegations of plagiarism at Guillermo del Toro's 2017 film, "The Shape of Water," included the maker of a recent Dutch short, the son of the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Zindel, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, who directed and co-wrote "Delicatessen." But Rachel Ingalls, the author of the 1982 novella "Mrs. Caliban," about an affair between a housewife and a green-skinned sea dweller, was conspicuous for her absence. She often is. Ingalls, whose works are frequently out of print, has been unjustly neglected, and she is also constitutionally self-effacing. In a rare interview, she explained her resistance to publicity as a fear of "being set up as the new arrival in the zoo." Attention flared when the British Book Marketing Council made "Mrs. Caliban" a wild-card entry on a list of the twenty best postwar American novels back in 1986, but only recently has she gained a broader readership that she seems likely to keep. Now her one novel-length work, "Binstead's Safari," published in 1983, is being reissued by New Directions.

Ingalls writes fables whose unadorned sentences belie their irreducible strangeness. Dense with allusion and impervious to any consistent interpretation, her work often invites contradictory responses. In one story, from 1987, a Biblical plague of toads emerges from a bathtub to beset a woman at the house of some sinister acquaintances. She wants her husband to drive her home, but he refuses, mystified at "how she could be so parochial as to leave just when Henry Kissinger was about to arrive: wasn't she interested in world politics, in history?" In a 1992 novella, a creepily precocious little boy rings a doorbell and explains to the woman who answers that he's actually a grown man trapped, "Freaky Friday" style, in the body of his own son; despite his pleas and threats, she returns him to his dad, who soon asks for her hand in marriage and who, local gossip suggests, may have bumped off a previous wife. We're not sure whether the son has successfully usurped his father's position and picked himself a mother to marry, or whether the woman has betrayed a frightened child, joining forces against him with the man who may destroy them both. In her grim yet playful fashion, Ingalls is concerned with the rules and conventions by which societies are organized, the violent machinations by which they are maintained. Like a good tragedian, she tends to heap up corpses at the end of her tales, and even in her quieter examinations of

familial bonds she leaves readers to wonder, of her spouses and siblings, who might push whom off a cliff. In her vision of intimacy and interdependence, you're simply not safe until everybody else is dead.

Ingalls's work hybridizes classical literature and mid-century Americana. Born in 1940, she grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where her father was a professor of Sanskrit at Harvard and her mother kept house. As a child, she absorbed radio soaps and "Creature from the Black Lagoon" alongside Euripides and Shakespeare, playing the chorus in "Iphigenia in Aulis" in fourth grade. After graduating from Radcliffe, she spent the summer of 1964 in England, to see all the quadricentennial productions of Shakespeare that she could; the next year, she moved there permanently. Her début novella, "Theft," appeared in 1970, and was followed by a cluster of other longish stories.

These stories, exploring the fatalistic territory that has held her interest ever since, often send Americans to a foreign land, where their ancient conflicts and compulsions show up in sharp relief. In "St. George and the Nightclub," the middle-aged narrator, banished by his wife to a separate room in their hotel, looks back on "eleven years falling into the machinery and being caught in it with all the wheels going around and tearing you to pieces, and then one day instead of being rescued, the factory suddenly closes down. There you still are, caught in a monster machine, but all motion has gone out of it." The disappointments of marriage are like those of life in general: you keep reproducing the horrors that have been visited on you until, with energies exhausted and conflicts unresolved, an arbitrary ending is imposed. "Theft" is a bleak parable about Seth, a starving family man who has been jailed for stealing a loaf of bread. It's hard to tell when the story takes place: wealthy young radicals dragged into the nearby cells seem of the twentieth century—they cry, "Police brutality, imperialist pig"—but there are also hints of a retelling of the Passion of Christ. A climactic crucifixion scene contains an unexpected joke: as the Christ figure asks why he's been forsaken, a prisoner on a nearby cross calls out, "God almighty, why can't you pull yourself together and take it like a man?"

After publishing these first stories, Ingalls found herself stuck, as a writer, for most of a decade. But in her early forties she re-emerged, with a profusion of brilliant work. Her masterpiece, "Mrs. Caliban," represents a leap marked by a delight in ambiguity,

which extends here even to the title. Who, in this novella, is Caliban? Could it be Larry, the hairless, muscular, six-foot-seven, dark-green creature who has slain his tormentors at the Institute for Oceanographic Research and has turned up in the kitchen of the housewife, Dorothy, seeking shelter and offering sex, courteous companionship, and help with the housework? Larry could certainly be the persecuted other of post-colonial readings of "The Tempest." ("I've figured out the make-up," he tells Dorothy, after experimenting with disguises that might allow him to explore unmolested at night. "The secret is to wear a color that's different from most of the people who live in the area." Not surprisingly, this tactic doesn't keep him safe for long.) Yet he ultimately seems more exiled duke than enslaved native. Perhaps the likelier candidate is Dorothy herself, marooned in her West Coast suburb, neglected by her philandering husband—they are, she tells her only friend, "too unhappy to get a divorce"—and numbed by the successive deaths of an infant son, an unborn child, and the family dog.

Housewife and beast are hard to separate—Dorothy's name suggests exile from home (Kansas, Oz), and Larry may well be her own wishful creation, both erotic substitute and compensation for the children she's lost. Mothering Larry, though, is no easy feat. She blows the household budget on vast quantities of avocados for him. (Larry, though a frequent killer of humans in self-defense, is a vegetarian.) And her efforts to elucidate society's workings can bring her to the point of vertigo:

> She had started out with the introduction of agriculture, the coming of industry, the exploitation of women, the fact that it all started in the home where there was no choice, the idea that eventually robots and machines would release people to live a life of leisure and explore their own personalities; but, just before she reached that point, she forgot how to wind it up. . . . Even what she could recall didn't seem to make so much sense anymore. In fact, it was sort of a mess and impossible to explain. She had stopped, confused, and added, "But what people really want is to be happy."

Before her big green chance at happiness came along, Dorothy was stuck wondering if, "like her, laboratory rats took a pride in solving the puzzles scientists set them." Still, Dorothy herself can be nearly as controlling as the godlike researchers at the institute, asking only reluctantly if Larry would occasionally prefer to go out without her: "Would it help to make you feel you have some independence?" Allowed to roam free,

Larry is impressed with the design of Dorothy's world. "Everything in it fits," he says. "You couldn't have dreamed it up yourself, but somehow it all seems to work, and each tiny part is related. Everything except me." For him, the major flaw in his situation is permanence—the opposite of the usual human complaint. "If I had known I was only going to stay a short while, this would have been the most exciting thing I could imagine," he tells Dorothy. "But to know that it's forever, that I'll always be here where I'm not able to belong, and that I'll never be able to get back home, never . . ." He lowers his massive head in sorrow; she starts making plans for his return to the sea.

So resistant are humans to the very freedoms they yearn for that it sometimes seems there can be no escape without supernatural intervention. Like "Mrs. Caliban," "Binstead's Safari" approaches its philosophical concerns through the awakening of a downtrodden spouse and her romance with an other-than-human creature. The caddish Stan Binstead and his mousy wife, Millie, are childless, even though when they married he expected her, having "no other interests and no other plans," to get pregnant right away. An anthropologist, he reluctantly agrees to take her along on his trip to East Africa to research a lion cult there. During a layover in London, he leaves her alone to wander the city while he sleeps around. Millie visits the zoo and empathizes with the pandas, whose "failed love-life had been on the front page of all the daily papers." "Never mind," she reflects. "There are lots of us." Yet once they arrive in Africa a transformation begins—Stan is received as the dullard and Millie the incisive beauty who enjoys the attentions of all, not least Harry (Simba) Lewis, a suspiciously leonine man, whose voice "came to her hardly as part of the exterior world, but as though inspired within herself, like the beat of a second heart."

"Binstead's Safari" is partly a through-the-looking-glass response to Hemingway's singularly unpleasant story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," in which a three-way power struggle ensues when an American couple goes hunting with a guide. Macomber's wife—"still a great beauty in Africa, but she was not a great enough beauty any more at home to be able to leave him and better herself, and she knew it and he knew it"—cuckolds him after a lion hunt reveals his cowardice, then perhaps accidentally puts a bullet in him just when he has at last, by taking down some buffalo, joyfully come into his manhood. But in Ingalls's story Stan is the only one with this appetite for a macho war of all against all—and it doesn't serve him terribly well. Millie, tellingly, is named for Millamant, the heroine of Congreve's "The Way of the World,"

whose most famous scene has her and her suitor negotiating in detail the terms and conditions of their love match—demonstrating the charm and importance of a social contract over unfettered Hobbesian individualism. And, while Stan withers in the unfamiliar environment, his wife discovers a new form of expression and exchange: she begins to paint, offering the results as gifts. Stan alone doesn't appreciate her canvases, which he dismisses as "sort of like Rousseau."

Stan is so busy hunting for exotic savagery everywhere except his own psyche that he fails to see the complex culture and social codes that surround him. He fixates on the idea that human sacrifice must be part of the native rituals. "You think they might tether a girl out in the open at night and let the lions come for her?" he asks one of their hosts, and is told, "I suppose that's why they made you a professor, for dreaming up ideas like that." Only dimly does the awareness creep upon him that he may be unpopular there not because he's white or foreign or well-off but "because of the way he behaved."

Like "Binstead's Safari," many of Ingalls's other novellas and stories from the nineteen-eighties view the social through the domestic. Vacations remain especially useful plot devices—the change of scenery that lays bare a character's underlying circumstances. More metaphysical forms of transport also prove revelatory. In the mystical sex comedy "Blessed Art Thou," Anselm, a young monk, after a thrillingly erotic visitation from the Angel Gabriel, begins to metamorphose into a visibly pregnant woman, throwing the other members of his order into disarray and bringing to the surface all their submerged discord and hypocrisies. The head of the order protests that its members believe in "God, the Virgin Birth, Christ The Redeemer, the teachings of Mother Church and the life everlasting. And that's damn well it." He even resorts to presenting existing doctrine as mere "symbolic manifestations of spiritual truths." Meanwhile, Anselm, at first glowing with his mission, is brought down to earth:

> He had always imagined that women enjoyed a special kind of freedom because nothing was ever going to be expected of them, but now he saw that they were just as trapped as men. He had to find a husband, and as soon as possible. It didn't matter whether it was someone he was genuinely fond of . . . or a man he didn't care about at all. Anybody would do, and for the baby's sake any deception would be justified.

Another story, "In the Act," is an even more efficient dispatch of an entire social system by way of an unhappy marriage. A wife resentfully confiscates her husband's nubile homemade sex robot and demands that he design a male equivalent for her. But the product disappoints: "his conversation was narrow in the extreme," and "his sexual prowess was without subtlety, charm, surprise, or even much variety." (To be fair, "she didn't believe that her husband had tried to shortchange her; he simply hadn't had the ingenuity to program a better model.") The original sexbot, meanwhile, has been stolen by a roughneck, who refuses to give her back. As so often in Ingalls's work, the characters would rather destroy whatever they've got than be made to share it. What's precious is by definition whatever no one else can have.

One of Ingalls's fleshiest evocations of such zero-sum power plays is captured in the title of her 1986 novella collection, "The Pearlkillers." It refers to a eugenicist family, in the story "Inheritance," whose skin secretes a substance that causes pearls to shrivel. Servants "don't have families," a great-aunt airily explains to her descendant; if the wealthy have heredity and tradition to keep them in line, the poor have only religion and other communal terrors, here signified by a pool of flesh-eating fish. This pool is, in fact, a perennial warning to the weak. For Stan Binstead, myth was "a large and potent drama to which the smaller lives of ordinary people made constant reference," and the fish pool likewise fulfills a kind of religious function, as "a focus of attention to which other things are referred." If it disappeared, a patrician uncle insists, "the people who'd miss it most of all are the ones who are the most afraid of getting thrown into it."

A related symbol reappears in Ingalls's last published story, "No Love Lost," from the 2002 collection "Days Like Today": a steep, lawless quarry into which people's enemies can be flung. These stories have returned to a mode closer to that of "Theft" than to the deft romance of "Mrs. Caliban" or "Binstead's Safari." They evoke societal breakdown and forever wars, damage on a scale so vast that fairy-tale curses and omens begin to lose their bite. In them, lurid neurosis has lurched into common unhappiness. The result is to confirm that one of Ingalls's most distinctive gifts is for symbolism that is both gaudy and lifelike. Her symbols attain a rare autonomy, and yet they also concentrate so many possible meanings that they move toward abstraction.

The images that linger longest in the mind have the quality of being at once profound and absurd. For days, in "Mrs. Caliban," Larry performs a repeating series of incomprehensible motions, "punching, stalking, listening, fighting, twitching, acting all at once." It's something he saw on TV, but he doesn't know what it could possibly mean. "What is it?" he keeps asking Dorothy. At last, she figures out that it's a perfect rendition of a Merce Cunningham routine, copied from an ad. Classical ballet makes intuitive sense to Larry: "Very nice. Full of music." By contrast, he finds the Cunningham sequence as mysterious as he finds human beings in general, these strange organisms who experience themselves as individuals, all different "inside," and perhaps capable of happiness only with someone equally particular. The routine captures many of Ingalls's central concerns—about art, about chance and fate, about love and aggression. Punching, stalking, listening: here we are, marooned creatures bound to repeat a disjointed series of expressive actions, whose true purpose will remain unknown. ◆

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