

Abstract for “Lena in Lent and Other Stories”
by Janet Patterson Karns

“Lena in Lent and Other Stories,” a collection of eight pieces of short fiction, explores ideas of desire, agency, obligation, faith, isolation, and community.

The first four stories in the collection, the Lena stories, center on the life of a young woman as she struggles to navigate the waters of conflicting self-interests. The stories spotlight four episodes in one year of Lena’s life, from summer to spring, and her long awakening to the truths of where both her own agency and her own passivity have brought her.

“Mildred Corey” observes a day in the life of a seventy-something woman experiencing frustration and displacement in her later years, annoyed by the ever-presence of her retired husband, and preoccupied with her disappointing relationship with a mostly absent daughter. (Mildred is a minor character in “Lena in Lent,” the third Lena story, but “Mildred Corey” is roughly concurrent with “Lena in Summer.”)

“May Belle” is the story of a recently widowed young truck-stop waitress barely keeping it together to parent her young son as she grapples with grief, anger, isolation, and near poverty. When her son’s behavior at school begins to deteriorate, contributing to stresses at work, May Belle reaches a breaking point.

“Hershey” is a coming-of-age story about a girl who spends many idyllic summers with her grandparents in the country before her grandfather’s descent into mental illness and her own ascent into adolescence herald the end of the era.

“Drew Tyler,” the final piece in the collection, follows a twelve-year-old boy in his quest to replace his sister’s destroyed birthday cake, the latest casualty in his mother’s onslaught of “diabolical tricks.”