

## FICTION

## ROUSTABOUT

By Michelle Chalfoun.  
HarperCollins, \$22.

To someone outside the circus world, the term "roustabout" carries an aura of raffish adventure. What a surprise, then, to find that this novel about one of the few women to work on the back lot is so relentlessly grim. Practically the only hint of contentment in these pages occurs when the narrator, Mat (short for Matilda), and another roustabout, a young man named Danny, spend a day entwined in a bathtub in an abandoned house — and even this moment owes its existence to the "magic" revealed by dropping acid. Mat is 18 when she begins her story, recalling how, many years earlier, she and her stripper mother moved in with a man who worked for the circus. After her mother ran off, 9-year-old Mat was left in the care of this lecherous stepfather; since the age of 15, she's been sleeping with Jayson, the chief of the ring crew. The rest of her "family" consists of Al, a gay black cook, and Tante, the one-eyed costume mistress, who was horribly scarred when her husband set her afire. Although several years go by before the novel's action concludes, Mat ends up scarcely wiser than when she started out. The novel leaves her with a glimmer of — what? Not hope, certainly, but merely the possibility of change.

CAROL PEACE ROBINS

## BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY

By Karen Osborn.  
Morrow, \$23.

In a packet of letters wrapped in ribbons "gone thin as tissue paper," a young woman learns the story of her great-great-grandmother. Through these letters, Abigail Conklin also speaks to us, telling how she left Virginia just after the Civil War to travel across the continent with her husband

trial. But is the suspect — a respected and beloved college professor — really the author of a devilishly sick scheme to terrorize the families of idyllic Deer Lake, Minn.? Ellen North is the tough county prosecutor, armed with evidence and anger; Tony Costello is the flashy big-town lawyer intent on winning fame and fortune with a headline case; and Jay Butler Brooks is the reporter, a self-centered firebrand who appears to derive pleasure from the suffering of others. The evidence seems clear: the police have their man. But North's case starts to fall apart as an-

go by the name of Howe & Hummel (the actual 19th-century lawyers who helped hooligans and prostitutes get the better of Boss Tweed's corrupt courts). Soon we are on the prowl with Harp, the firm's best private investigator, whose job is to find the missus and whose fate, naturally, is to unearth much more. Corpses are the least of it. Like E. L. Doctorow's "Waterworks," which is set in the same year, "Scarlet Women" deftly excavates the city's rich past. Harp's world is one in which immigrants are both the cops and the robbers, lust can lead to some nasty litiga-

tures. After astonishing feats of der-ring-do, he goes through a necessary re-entry process known as pumpkinification, returning to the grandeur of small-town life in Ohio with a somewhat realigned perspective. Throughout, Jack criticizes many of the traditional virtues associated with the American Dream, but he rarely descends into pedantry. While much of his verbal playfulness seems, at first, just plain silly (in part because the author not only sustains it but shamelessly builds on it), the plot rises into true hilarity in the final pages.

SUSAN OSBORN



DAVID TRITMAN

## A Long Way From Manila

"Where are you from?" is a question too often asked of the young, American-born Filipino women who populate M. Evelina Galang's stirring debut collection of stories, **HER WILD AMERICAN SELF** (Coffee House Press, paper, \$12.95). Whether the person asking is a bystander at a bus stop, a school classmate wrinkling her nose at the smell of a box lunch of rice and fish, or a film director known for his sleazy attitude toward Asian women, none are satisfied when the answer turns out to be Michigan, Wisconsin or New York. But if the ignorance and insensitivity of strangers is borne with graceful yet sarcastic humor, the pressures of home — under the zealous gaze of parents eager for their daughters to partake of the "land

of opportunity" — yield a frustrated, rebellious sadness. In "Miss Teenage Sampaguita," a visiting aunt observes her brother's tyrannical hold on her niece, who is expected to become a doctor and is deprived of everyday pleasures like the right to date or even talk on the telephone. And in "Talk to Me, Milagros," a silent child watches as her lawyer father, recently arrived from the Philippines, is reduced to working as a busboy in a diner. While a number of Ms. Galang's stories lack a certain dynamic force, all are told in an elegant, mesmerizing style. The finest, "Filming Sausage," is sharp with tension, while the brief, chantlike monologues that frame the collection are as lyrical as prayers.

ABBY FRUCHT