*Alternative Medicine* by Laura Solomon pp 229 Publishers: Flame Books ISBN

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On a cream ground dotted with a few mysterious marks beside a bumble bee, a Mexican Walking Fish noses the title. Crawlies on the back of this book could produce heebies, the jeebies and maybe until now the unknown zeeblies, but why not a forewarning? Realistic stories perhaps, but some shivery or occasionally terrifying with welcome humour off and on, all quite original, (and why my arts annual *Magazine* has accepted so much of Solomon’s work over the years).

A nod to a few masters like Dahl and Poe, perhaps also Banks but not derivative.   
Dahl appeared associated because Solomon simply writes into the aberrant or sly behaviour of human beings in a subtle way like Roald Dahl did, and the creepiness gradually appeared so my eyes slowly got wider and wider, which reminded me of reading him. Quite an amount of disappointment in some of these stories too, and people veered away on their own tangents like Dahl favoured, however Solomon's writing is not really like his in total, it is really fresh.

Poe approached horror with a moralistic tone. I noted then in Solomon's book, which is more wide-ranging than only horror or fantasy, her heart transplant story made me think of Poe's tale where the heart of a murdered victim beats under the floorboards of the house. Poe often hinted death was not final, there could be more going on in more realms than we ever imagine and we need to take care too, really. Solomon writes with an acute awareness of the 'otherness' of things and a sympathetic attitude in some ways towards people's fragility.

Iain Banks wrote *The Wasp Factory* and if you have not read his novel I suggest you do, soon. A truly scary read and deeply disturbing so be warned, however he strangely combines humour with his frightening ideas, and Solomon's writing also has delightful or wry humour mixed with her own particular style of delightful strangeness. *(The Crow Road,* by the way, Banks also wrote and it is I hear his most accessible and amusing novel).

Solomon writes high quality work in other words. She must do for these three excellent writers to be associated with her *Alternative Medicine,* in my mind while I read then reviewed her latest. I felt all smiles at the prospect of getting back to the book, each time albeit a little scared as well, but in a good way.

There are a couple or maybe three or so really mad stories but the one about the supernatural bed covering wins the crazy prize. Hilarious, and to make me laugh with writing is usually difficult since I so often see what is coming next, but not here. Solomon plays on the 'bird' nickname for women too, I think, which becomes ironic since the woman in the story's attractiveness disappears except to herself.

The comment it makes about relationships is extreme since the woman transforms in a nightmarish way, but it is true many people tend to show strange sides to themselves after you get to know them a while. Their obsessions may also be unbearably peculiar. Solomon uses a crazy way of showing something real, albeit usually the abstract idea of how people have many sides to them. So imaginative as well, I loved this story and maybe I'm not completely sure why either.

*Alternative Medicine* from novelist, poet and playwright Laura Solomon, a good holiday read, or for the bus, a work-break or bed-time. Dip in. You too can marvel over and wonder about the oddities she shows us, then later find you've learned more than you realised.

Active, quietly clever language with relentless clarity and many fazes so the reader could take a while to realise what is going on, the way anyone would when faced with something startling. *Alternative Medicine* is like a first-ever meeting with a herbalist or shiatsu masseuse. Every remedy effective but odd smells linger and stark twinges occur. Also, someone's left a glowing duvet in the stairwell and the essential oil’s on top of an out-of-tune piano. Then, what’s on the radio, alien call-signs after all?

Solomon's humour subtle and at times her scenarios are brutal but never crass. Not scared to frighten the reader, she also colours various moods vividly to suit each narrative's acrobatic progression. A real consistency throughout and every single story stands alone with many strengths, being quite different from the others.

Each detailed incident offers chances to imagine more and relate well to some idiosyncratic characters. A few meet pain and injustice, some find a path through ruination; change and falsehoods look inevitable. A sense of shared humanity lingers, while Solomon fixes things with the usual toolbox of the thriller writer who corners fast then also, offers music for the ride; hope or amusement in the face of disappointment or regret, (at the very least some understanding). In the past, a sadistic little girl and someone learns to live with the memory. A heart transplant patient bothered by new memories and melancholy, meets their future. We also go behind the scenes of Santa's Grotto and witness a competition ....

Busy people feel stressed, isolated or they slyly manipulate, a few stories just plain crazy like I suggested before, however a sharp, firm manner is evident while bold imagery unfurls rich or startling pictures. A pleasurable read and somewhat edgy.

Some paragraphs too long, too often and a few typos such as most books do have (just saying that’s all), but *minor quibbles* aside the cover looks gorgeous, the font legible, paper’s adequate and the blurb reads fairly except the majority are not 'absurd' stories. Down-to- earth more like it, albeit including worms, litter, alien footprints and old bones along with dirt. I’d love to see a hardback with more substantial, finely designed pages, and in any case I may reread Alternative Medicine again, garner more from the rarities, wide variety, hard fun and poetic style.