

"Your Body Is Changing" by Jack Pendarvis; MacAdam/Cage; 193 pages; \$23.

"I'm Dickens, He's Fenster," a comedy starring Marty Ingels and the pre-"Addams Family" John Astin, ran on ABC for about a year in the early 1960s. One episode, "The Joke," made what may be the quintessential statement on humor.

BODY TALK - 'Your Body Is Changing' is Jack Pendarvis' second book. CNS Photo.

One of the principals - Dickens (Astin) or Fenster (Ingels), it doesn't matter which (and that, by the way, is how to kill a joke: by supplying unnecessary details, unless, of course, the unnecessary details are themselves the source of the humor, e.g. Mark Twain's "The Story of Grandfather's Old Ram") - hears a joke and tells it to the other, Dickens or Fenster, it doesn't matter which (see above).

Anyway (and whenever a would-be joke-/storyteller inserts an "anyway," it indicates that either he doesn't know what he's doing or that he's employing the "Old Ram" offense), one of them thinks the joke is funny and the other doesn't. They decide to settle the matter by telling the joke to a group of friends, but they divide 50/50. Soon, the whole town has split into roving bands of baseball-bat and chain-wielding "It's a funny joke!"/"It's not a funny joke!" zealots.

That's funny.

And so is the tale of Henry, a sensitive 14-year-old fundamentalist Christian who hates and fears secular humanists and liberal elites, but whose hormones - some perfectly normal, some way, way out of whack - have him in a constant state of dazzled wooziness. Caught up in a spiritual journey, Henry becomes valet to a "Leave It to Beaver"-fixated preacher making his way from Alabama to New York in a jury-rigged wagon pulled by a team of goats the preacher refers to as "mighty rams," carrying a replica of the Ten Commandments fashioned from a cardboard refrigerator box on which there was room for only six. ("God cannot blame me for that," Brother Lampey explains. "If anything, He should blame the manufacturers of this flimsy refrigerator crate.")

By the time author Jack Pendarvis has driven that team of goats to the end of the novella that serves as the title story of his collection, "Your Body Is Changing," it doesn't seem unreasonable that the boy and his favorite goat have stolen the show at a lesbian bar/theater and fallen in with a band of traveling Earth Mother feminist actors.

That's not to mention the angry armless and legless motel manager. Or the insufferable art professor ("And the joy on Dora's face when she introduced you to the concept of fennel ..."). Or Henry's being distracted by "Amy Middleton from the 11th grade (who) looked like Polly Finch from behind, the American hero who had been exploded in a methamphetamine lab as part of the war on terrorism."

In "Lumber Land," a doofus millionaire wastrel fancies himself a private detective and drags a slovenly semi-reporter for the unread Lumber Land Monitor along with him, in the role of goon, on a case of dubious reality; "Outsiders" features expat Alabamians in New York for an O. Henry ending; "Tollbooth Confidential" is a hash-hazed tale of deeply flawed drug smuggling. Pendarvis ("The Mysterious Secret of the Valuable Treasure") somehow infuses the most ludicrous characters with a sad, touching humanity, which serves him well in the couple of (not quite as successful) serious stories in this collection.

He has a weakness for the double-twist, preposterously weird ending, which seems just a desperate way to wind up a hilarious journey to nowhere; it's like a performer, having run out of bits, suddenly spreading his arms, bellowing a mock "Ta da!" and exiting, stage left.

But the humor? You either think it works or it doesn't. It knocked me stupid, but ultimately that's the kind of thing that's impossible for a reviewer to get across. It's like trying to tell a stranger about rock 'n' roll.

- Arthur Salm

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Book Review: "Your Body is Changing"™ by Arthur Salm " CNS