

FICTION

Can't shake the past

By Meredith Maran

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

"Marginalized" is a word that a sociology professor might use, or a perennial therapy patient, or an old-school activist. It's the kind of word that the kind of person who uses "discourse" in a sentence uses in a sentence.

But if you're marginalized, or think you might be, that sense of peering in at the center from the margins is anything but academic. I speak from experience, as a lifelong writer who has

The Taste of Salt

By Martha Southgate
(Algonquin; 304 pages;
\$13.95 paperback)

always been female, came out as gay-ish a quarter-century ago, and is now trending toward old. When I get a "no" from a publisher or a magazine editor, I force myself through the standard litany of rejection rationales — "It's the economy." "It's the Internet." "I suck." But I always end up wondering if I didn't get the gig, or the gig-giver didn't get me, because I'm too female, too gay or, lately, too not 32.

What does this have to do with "The Taste of Salt," Martha Southgate's searing, gorgeous, brilliant and profoundly human novel about two generations of an African American family riding the slow-mo roller coaster of addiction?

A lot. I've read my share of addiction books; I've even written one. But because Southgate is so talented, and because her characters are African American and I am not, "The Taste of Salt" brought me to a vantage point I simply couldn't have arrived at on my own. And so this novel is more than a cancel-your-appointments, hold-my-

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Books

FICTION

Around the horn

By Adam Langer

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

For all that Walt Whitman, Robert Pinsky, John Updike, Roger A. Caras, and their ilk have written about the great American pastime, it is surprising how few novels about baseball have found their way into the canon.

The Art of Fielding

By Chad Harbach
(Little, Brown;
512 pages;
\$25.99)

There have been fine works by terrific stylists, who have nevertheless managed to incur the wrath of some baseball purists (e.g. Bernard Malamud's "The Natural," Philip Roth's "The Great American Novel," Michael Chabon's "Summerland"). Then there have been the highly acclaimed novels, such as Peter Schilling Jr.'s "The End of Baseball" and Mark Winegardner's

"The Veracruz Blues," which still have not found a wide audience. Mark Harris' "Bang the Drum Slowly" and W.P. Kinsella's "Shoeless

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Can't shake the past

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calls page-turner about addiction and its collateral victims. It's also an object lesson in the true cost of shoving authors and their work into little boxes — white writers marketed to white readers, black writers to black readers, gay to gay, young to young, male to male, and so on. Southgate has devoted her career to breaking down that balkanization. Tellingly, her website features a link to a blog called White Readers Meet Black Authors, described as “a sometimes lighthearted, sometimes serious plea for everyone to give black authors a try.”

Marginalization is a dual-victim crime. Writers

lose access to the full range of their readership, and readers lose access to the full range of human experience. Southgate has earned her access pass, and she gives her readers as good as she gets. Her short stories, articles, essays and three previous novels, “The Fall of Rome,” “Third Girl From the Left” and “Another Way to Dance,” have won awards and accolades. (More, perhaps, if she were young, white, male? We'll never know.) Here's hoping “The Taste of Salt” is her breakout book. Certainly it's her best work yet.

The plot is predictable but incidental; action isn't what Southgate is after here. After all, there's only one trajectory an addic-



Tom Rawe

Martha Southgate

tion story can follow (from good to bad to worse), and only two ways it can end (recovery or death). What's new and important about this novel is the depth and breadth of its characters, the four Hendersons of Cleveland, who aren't the kind of white, middle-class familiars whose predicaments we're asked to care about in the vast

majority of American literary fiction.

Told in the alternating voices of Mother, Daddy, son Tick and daughter Josie, the novel is anchored by Josie, a refugee from her legacy, who got herself a “white” education, works at a “white” job (she's the only African American oceanographer at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts), and is restlessly married to a kind if insipid white man. Cleverly, Southgate has Josie cross the precarious rope bridge that connects black and white American life, then turn back to offer the (white) reader a hand. She makes crossing the chasm seem safe.

But it's not. Josie loses a lot for what she gains. And the reality she bares to the reader is fascinating, but

no fun to face. How does a black woman who's beaten the odds, escaped her fate, relish her success without forsaking the flawed, beloved parents and brother she left behind in pain and poverty?

What does it feel like to be a black woman who wants a black man, suddenly, when she's married to someone white? “I don't get to feel ... that kinky hair under my hands after so many years of straight hair. ... We were the same color, or at least close in color. ... He knew some things I knew without my having to explain them. I hadn't been aware of missing that until now.”

What happens when a broke, stinking, dope-sick Tick knocks on the door of his successful scientist sister? Southgate opens

that door to her readers, her many different kinds of readers, and lets all of us all the way in.

“I hope to see the day,” Southgate wrote in a 2007 New York Times essay, “when the work of African-Americans who tell our part of the American story well receives the celebration, and the sales, it deserves.” In “The Taste of Salt,” Martha Southgate does a lot more than hope for that day. She ushers it in with well-tuned trumpets thundering.

Meredith Maran is the author, most recently, of “My Lie: A True Story of False Memory.” Her first novel, “A Theory of Small Earthquakes,” will be published by Counterpoint in February. E-mail comments to books@sfchronicle.com.