

REIF LARSEN'S *The Selected Works of T S Spivet: A Novel* (Harvill Seeker 392pp £17.99) is an extra-

ordinarily original debut. The eponymous narrator is twelve-year-old Tecumseh Sparrow, a map-making prodigy living with his cowboy father, scientist mother and moody sixteen-year-old sister on their family ranch in Montana. Notably and painfully absent is T S's little brother Layton, killed in a tragic accident not long before the novel begins.

A telephone call interrupts T S from his task of mapping his sister shucking sweet corn; it is the Undersecretary of Illustration and Design at the Smithsonian Institution, who, believing himself to be talking to a grown-up academic, announces that T S has won the renowned Baird Award for the popular advancement of science. Excited, if a little nervous, T S sets out across the country to the awards dinner to be held in his honour in Washington DC.

T S's unorthodox journey is punctuated and illustrated by the 'maps' he draws: from diagrams of beetle anatomy, to the locations of McDonald's restaurants in North Dakota, to possible outcomes of games of cat's cradle, these maps fill out our understanding of this unusual boy, in particular his grief and guilt over Layton's death and desperate desire for his family to heal itself.

There are moments when T S's narrative voice is too old for his years, betraying thought patterns and vocabulary too complex for even a highly precocious twelve-year-old, but such is the charm of this novel that this slight incongruity does not matter in the least.

Another debut novelist experimenting with form and succeeding is Matthew Reynolds. His *Designs for a Happy Home: A Novel in Ten Interiors* (Bloomsbury 256pp £16.99) masquerades as an interior-design manual, its narrator betraying all the irritating stereotypes one associates with the breed: Alizia Tamé's stylistic quirks include a great fondness for exclamation marks and frequent pauses to ask of the reader, 'Do you know what I mean?'

Successful and respected, Alizia begins her book charged with glee about the accomplishments of her career and the cosiness of life with partner Jem. She believes fundamentally in 'Design – for Life!', her personal 'Magic Motto', and tries to structure her private life and the lives of those around her using the same tools she employs in her career. People, however, cannot be arranged like furniture, and Alizia's smugness is shaken as her life and her book gradually fall to pieces around her.

What makes this sad and gentle story of a family's breakdown so gripping is the immediacy of the format. Letters from Alizia's friends and colleagues are included; they are intended by Alizia to give a more complete sense of the interplay between her life and work, but actually function as a blow-by-blow account of her downfall.

Reynolds copes well with the different voices he takes on, but there is a sense that he lets down his protagonist by drawing her with less complexity than she deserves.

JO CAIRD ON FOUR INTRIGUING
FIRST NOVELS

Alizia is just a little too silly and stereotyped; there are times when it feels as if Reynolds falls back on humour to conceal a lack of insight. Nonetheless this is an engrossing, clever and funny novel.

Jessica Grant's *Come, Thou Tortoise* (Old Street Publishing 412pp £9.99) offers a more traditional format, but is rich in eccentricity. Audrey Flower has been called home to the bedside of her father, who lies in a coma after an unfortunate accident with a Christmas tree. By the time she arrives he has died, and Audrey and her Uncle Thoby must face the consequences, both practical and emotional. Audrey's narrative responsibilities are shared by her inherited pet tortoise Winifred, who is left at home in Oregon during her mistress's absence. This quirky touch makes for somewhat bizarre reading but works well as a means of gaining further insight into Audrey's life.

The beauty of Grant's writing is in its detail. Both Audrey and her uncle are mildly unhinged characters, fiercely loyal and loving; they share an often bizarre sense of humour that not everyone around them quite appreciates. They are tenderly described, with Grant gently mocking them for their eccentricities while avoiding any cynicism about these simple folk.

The denouement is a work of great subtlety and skill. It utterly changes the way the reader sees the novel, revealing greater depths to Grant's plotting than are initially evident. Such sensitivity will have readers clamouring for a second novel from this talented Canadian writer.

The Harrowing, by Robert Dinsdale (Faber & Faber 320pp £12.99), is set largely in northern France in 1916. Although the novel draws on the historical details of the Somme Offensive, the focus is not the war *per se* but rather the personal experiences of a pair of Yorkshire brothers, William and Samuel Redmond. After almost killing William in an unprovoked attack, Samuel is frogmarched to the front, effectively sentenced to death by the boys' aggrieved parents. When William wakes from his coma and discovers his brother gone, he sets out to find him, driven by a combination of love, anger and regret to save Samuel's life.

The novel is primarily told in two parts, from the point of view of first William, then Samuel. The younger brother is constantly referred to as William attempts to trace his flight, yet at this stage the reader has had no real opportunity to experience the character for himself or herself. He is a shadowy presence until halfway through the book, eerily evoking the ghosts of the young men lost over the course of that brutal summer.

Old Testament imagery saturates *The Harrowing*. William and Samuel are a transplanted Cain and Abel, but Dinsdale avoids simplifying this most turbulent of family relationships; Samuel is not evil incarnate and William, it turns out, is no saint. The biblical belief structures held to by so many characters are frequently found lacking.

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