

she intends as a public service. Gerber reflects on her father's unanticipated stroke, the immediate changes in all relationships within the family, and the socio-economic implications of homecare. She thinks out loud about how "we have no prayers or rituals for the death of someone who hasn't died" (3). She calls herself a dutiful daughter and documents the struggle to be a wife, parent, doctoral student, sister, daughter, and individual whose consciousness is awakened as the *paterfamilias* becomes dependent on others. The book probes two key questions: What occurs when an adult daughter's already full life must suddenly accommodate an ill father and concern for her caregiving mother? How does the daughter sustain her own life when her primary relationships, at least temporarily, are with her parents?

What stands out for this reader is how Gerber weaves her father's history as a German Jew and an American immigrant into the story of his stroke and its impact on her mother. Her father is assaulted, first by the stroke and then by the health care system. In her description of the aftermath of the stroke, Gerber embeds the story of her mother's day-to-day life. But Gerber's relationship with her mother is not developed in this book. Rather, she shows a father who is self-determined at the expense of his wife, and a daughter who is torn in two and living a paradox, a disjunction; Gerber "can't find the words to describe my feelings. Ordinary language is not sufficient" (50).

Gerber admits that she feels responsible for and compelled to care for her father, but she also acknowledges her naiveté and that she is configured as the heroine of the story she writes. Based on Ray's definition of caregiving as "an activity that involves intimacy and connection, in which care is given freely," Gerber identifies herself as a caregiver. I am unconvinced, however, that Gerber actually fits the definition. As her book shows through wrenching examples, care for her father is necessary, required, and urgent, but women are not always in a position to give it freely.

## **Giovanna's 86 Circles and Other Stories**

Paola Corso.

Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

### **Reviewed by Roxanne Harde**

Award-winning poet Paola Corso's first collection of short fiction offers a variety of feminine perspectives from different life stages. Set in working-class Italian neighbourhoods in the Pittsburgh area, the ten stories are narrated by a variety of women and girls who offer views of the ordinary with occasional dashes of magical realism. The volume begins and ends with narratives by

middle-aged women about their mothers. In the first, “Yesterday’s News,” a woman mourns her mother with the help of a wildly eccentric thrift-shop owner. “Roman Arches,” the final story, is just as sharply imaginative as the protagonist returns home for a Christmas visit to find that her aging mother, always obsessed with Lucille Ball, now believes she is Lucy Ricardo. Arabella blends her memories of her mother with her mother’s stories of her Italian village, all interspersed with her mother acting out episodes from *I Love Lucy*. Both stories, like so many others in the book, invoke questions about mother-daughter relationships, their emotional investments and responsibilities.

While the book is being marketed to adults, the many child and teenage voices in this collection and the accessibility of the writing make it equally appealing to a young adult audience. Girls and young women are the narrators of stories that investigate a variety of female relationships: between mothers and daughters, friends, co-workers, granddaughters and their “Nonnas,” and sisters. The sister stories are especially powerful. In “Unraveled,” Renata examines the paradox of her teenage sister’s unwanted pregnancy and their neighbour’s inability to conceive a child that her whole family wants. In “Freezer Burn,” Charlene resurrects a ball of ancient starter dough for the sake of her sister. The original dough came from Sicily with their great-grandmother; Charlene’s ability to make this dough rise will ensure her sister’s success. In both stories, a little unpredictable domestic magic comes into play, and pain and pathos are tempered by positive outcomes. Other stories examine sexual tensions and feminine magic: in “Between the Sheets,” the heat and steam of a hospital laundry turn a teenage girl into a prophet, and female nature reclaims her own in a startling episode from the title story.

Overall, these are enjoyable narratives, compelling, often profound, sometimes poetic. Corso’s strength lies in her ability to combine the mundane and the magical and make them immediate, almost tangible, to the reader. However, while her descriptive narration is first-rate, detailed but cogent, Corso’s dialogue is too often awkward and unnatural. For example, when the sisters in “Freezer Burn” narrate family histories, they draw the reader into their stories, as do the voices of Corso’s third- and first-person speakers. But when the sisters engage in conversation, and especially argument, the stilted dialogue cuts short a reader’s engagement with the story. While Corso’s dialogue sometimes disappoints, her poetic talent shines through in narration that combines with remarkable concision sharp observations of everyday life and philosophical questions about what that means for girls and women. Overall, this is an excellent fiction for girls and women of all ages.