

The AFTBACK Chronicles, Susan Woldenberg Butler

This contemporary, 78,000-word fictional satire provides a jaundiced answer to the question, Just how are people supposed to cope these days when they're ...

... lassoed by love, 21st century-style?

Three stuffed animals — two bears and a terrier — enable their human mistress to endure a year's separation from her husband of five and three-quarters years by telling Scheherazade-like stories of their Mr Magoo-like encounters with daily life. Meet the dog: Bluey Bligmund discovers his wolf roots on a hideously expensive weekend in the Scottish Highlands. This leads to a career as an esteemed canine dykoanalyst. Bliggie opens a clinic at the top of the stairs, just down from the bedroom, for dogs like Lassie and Rin Tin Tin, who crash through the mirror on the wall into our reality.

And the bears: In his battle against autism, Mikey Kerowack channels Jack Kerouac and goes On the Road in the Lower 49, observing life roll by backwards from a hole in his packing box in a truck transporting refrigerated chicken wings. Sturgess Ursule takes time from searching for an Internet bride — ah Debi of the beehive hairdo and electric-blue bosomy ledge! — and worrying about his reascended testicles (they were so horrified at what he fathered that they promptly went right back up inside again) to go undercover and expose bear poaching in China, wrapped in his invisible cloak of ten thousand hand-sewn sequins. The book culminates in Reunion in the Wild West, an odyssey combining Jack Kerouac, Jean Cocteau and EarthFirst!

Poor Peter Brownlow. Poor Deirdre B. Being apart for twelve months is not the thing for a medical-doctor-soon-to-be-economics-professor and an art historian married for a mere five-and-four-fifths years.