

2 new novels share a theme: finding oneself

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Fiction can be an ideal vehicle to explore the question of self-discovery. Two new but vastly different novels offer compelling stories of such personal journeys. Each book is deeply moving and deserving of attention.

In Eric B. Martin's "The Virgin's Guide to Mexico" (MacAdam/Cage, \$25 hardcover), we are introduced to Alma Price, who lives comfortably in Texas suburbia. She is an awkward, restless and

precocious 16-year-old girl who has just been accepted to Harvard University. Alma's Mexican-born mother is beautiful and in control of her well-toned body; her father is white and apparently nothing more than a superficial, back-slapping businessman.

Alma's mother has hidden all traces of her Mexican past, something that only makes Alma curious about it. She finally decides to run away from home and discover her Mexican roots before beginning at Harvard.

Martin captures Alma's teenage self-loathing perfectly: "The naked girl in the mirror catches her eye and now she has to look. Hair brown, not auburn or Brunette or sandy -- brown, exactly like the word says. E Brown hair, square head, black eyes, red skin. Oh she confuses people. For the love of god, they cry. Sweet Jesus what is that thing."

Alma sneaks off, eventually makes it to Mexico disguised as a boy, and enters a world she never could have imagined. But that is only one part of the story: Her parents search for her, following leads and hunches, and learning things about themselves that they had long ago buried.

Martin's prose is biting, sharp and ironic, but he never forgets the humanity of his characters, the importance of their individual, poignant journeys.

"The Understory" (Ironweed Press, \$11.95 paperback) by Pamela Erens takes us on a very different odyssey. This debut novel, which won the Ironweed Press Fiction Prize, begins: "Many years ago, in a deli, I found flaky white bits floating in my self-serve coffee: the milk, sitting all day in a bucket of cold water, had turned sour. Since that day I have never drunk my coffee anything but black. Yet I look for those tainted curls every time: I pour, peer inside to reassure myself, then top it off."

The narrator is Jack Gorse, an eccentric man who has illegally taken up residence in a New York City apartment and who eventually finds himself living in a Buddhist monastery. He is a loner, struggling with obsessive-compulsive disorder and sexual identity. Gorse finds beauty and tranquility in Central Park's flora but is bedeviled by romantic encounters that play out only in his head.

This novel derives its power from Erens' ability to create a character who is simultaneously repulsive and sympathetic. In many ways, Gorse is reminiscent of that famous fictional misanthrope, Meursault, from the existential masterpiece "The Stranger" by Albert Camus. Though repelled, we also see ourselves in Gorse's self-delusion. All the while, we have the horrible sense that he is on the road to something horrible, maybe even devastating.

Martin and Erens are both exceptional writers who have created quirky but wholly believable protagonists. They have given us insight into the very human desire to make this world -- and our lives -- matter.

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