charismatic and ambitious woman whose behavior helped send our heroine into rehab in the first place: Beth forced her son to break off his secret engagement with Regina because she wasn't good enough for him. But Son Davis, Beth's dutiful son and Regina's beloved ex, died at the World Trade Center on 9/11, and now Beth has hired Regina to help establish a monument to Son's memory. Or, more specifically, to go through his personal papers and root out anything that might tarnish his memory—or Beth's political ambitions. OK, got all that?

It's an eventful excursion, and Cleage is an engaging tour guide who keeps the story moving and the pages turning. The accomplished playwright (*Blues for an Alabama Sky, Flyin' West*) knows how to construct a scene, and she's excellent at creating believable dialogue. Listen to the easy, slightly flirtatious exchange that ensues between Regina and Blue when she drops in to find him watching a French film.

> "Do you speak French?"
>
> He shook his head. "Not a word. I just like to watch foreign movies sometimes to see if I can figure out what's going on even though I have no idea what they're talking about."
>
> "How many times are you right?"
>
> "Almost always," he said, as I tried not to stare at his eyes, which seemed to be glowing in the room's low light. "But then again, how would I know?"

Weaving her tale in simple, elegant language, Cleage does again what she's done in her two previous novels: *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (Avon, December 1997, a 1998 Oprah's Book Club pick) and *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (William Morrow, 2001). She has written an entertaining novel infused with feminist sensibilities and radical political ideas.

Now, that's revolutionary.

WHAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE MADE OF

Sarah Gonzales

What Night Brings
By Carla Trujillo
Curbstone Press, $15.95

ANIMAL-BEHAVIOR EXPERTS AGREE that cats purr not only when content, but also when in need of comfort—say, when hurt or in labor—although the discrete purrs may sound identical. The highly likeable heroine in Carla Trujillo's debut novel, *What Night Brings,* appears to be purring in childhood bliss, when really she desperately needs help. Though lively and loveable, Marci Cruz is a little girl with big problems.

Marci has two secrets: She likes girls and her father beats her. But, from some gift of hearty optimism (or is it delusion?), she is positive that if God transforms her into a boy and makes her father leave forever, her contentment would be complete. After a hard-enough day of Catholic school, where she always poses the wrong questions ("Did God plan pterodactyls?"), and an evening in which her father might or might not throw her against the wall for making goddamned spaghetti once again, she goes to bed and prayerfully begs that her fate be altered.

Marci is a young girl from a Mexican-American family tottering just above the poverty line in 1960s Northern California. Marci wants to marry the girl next door; she believes in God, but with a caveat—she doesn't trust adults. And for good reason: Her mother is blind when it comes to her father. Her teachers are afraid to ask questions. Her chain-smoking grandmother arms her with a knife and a $20 bill for escape bus fare. Her married uncle is distracted by his own difficulties—such as coming out of the closet to his macho family.

Jean-Paul Sartre once wisely (or cynically, if you're not an optimist like Marci) noted: "We do not know what

we want, yet we are responsible for what we are—that is a fact." It's a fact that applies solely to adults (though not those in this novel): a child may know what she wants, but she certainly is not responsible for what she is. Yet.

Each morning, hoping that her nightly prayers have been answered, Marci peers down her pajama pants to check if her *cuca* is a penis yet—no change. She pads to the kitchen where she finds her father, still existing. This disappointing cycle recurs throughout the novel, leaving the reader as frustrated as Marci—but still cheering for our plucky heroine, of course. Unfortunately, after 200 pages of unremitting disillusionment and false starts in which the cycle is *nearly* broken—but not quite—the reader starts to squirm.

The near-improvements include an episode in which her father leaves the family for months; during this time Marci stalks him with a camera outside his favorite bar to catch him with his girlfriend. She records his philandering on film, but doesn't show her notoriously jealous mother the photos. In another nearly triumphant episode, their fed-up mother hauls Marci and her sister on a Greyhound to grandma's. But once mom places a pit-stop phone call to dad, they are homeward bound yet again. After a particularly brutal beating, Marci's uncle witnesses her bloodied face, her bruises, her terror, and instead of calling the police he tells her to call him if it ever happens again.

This unrelenting cycle within the novel parallels the centrifugal force of domestic violence: impulsive beatings, apologies, promises, persistent hope, more violence. One gets the sense of being trapped, not only in the storyline, but also within Marci's reality. Through Trujillo's graceful use of unadorned prose and vernacular Spanglish, the reader is charmed into an intimacy with Marci's thoughts. Were Marci not so likeable, so terrifically determined, the narrative of failed possibilities would prove unbearable for readers new to a violent veracity—vicarious or otherwise. Reminiscent of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the writing is luminous, while the excruciating content must be endured.

MOUTHS OF BABES

by Heidi Julavits

How to Breathe Underwater
By Julie Orringer
Knopf, $21

WHEN WRITING A REVIEW OF A short story collection, it may not be terribly helpful to focus on a single story, but sometimes that story is so remarkable, it warrants the purchase of an entire book. "Pilgrims" is such a story, and its concerns—that of fearfulness, of precipices, of the transition from familiar territory into one more foreign and often laced with menace—reverberate throughout Orringer's debut collection, *How to Breathe Underwater*. "Pilgrims" begins, as too many stories do, with a mother dying of cancer.

A reader would not be faulted in assuming this to be another predictable mother-with-cancer story—heartbreaking if redemptive, about a child coming to terms with death, etc.—but that reader would be wrong. Orringer's fictional landscape, while precisely evoked in the realist style, is less about making sense of the world than about embracing its nonsensical and terrifying inexplicability. The sto-