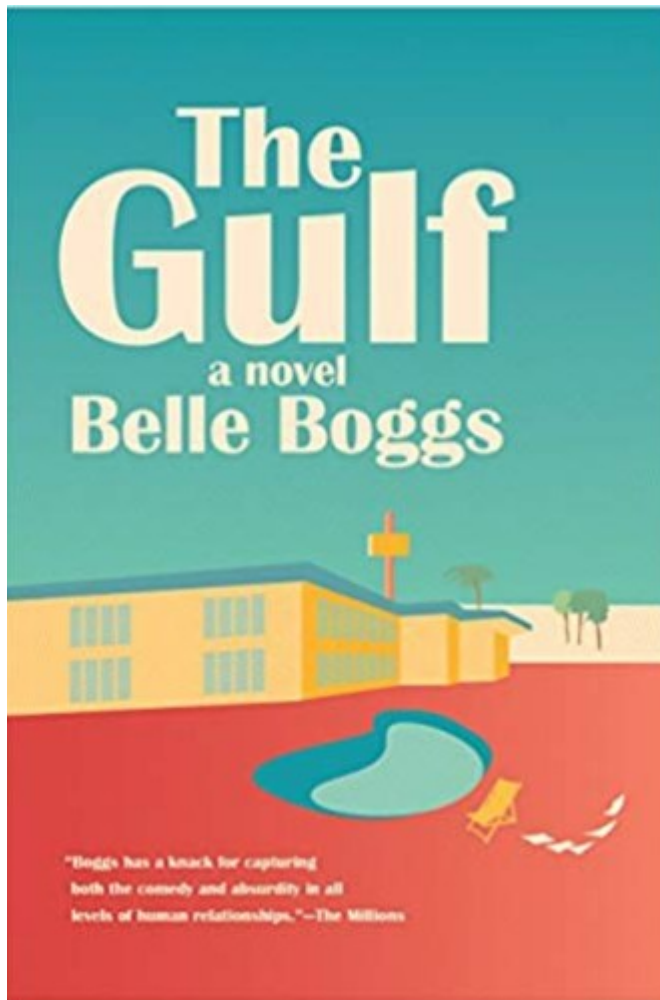


A novel about the chasms between people

## Can we cross them? Is it worth it?

by [Kaethe Schwehn](#) in the [May 22, 2019](#) issue

### In Review



### The Gulf

A Novel

By Belle Boggs

Graywolf Press

In *The Art of Waiting*, Belle Boggs captures a stretch of time in her life when she struggled with infertility. Although the essays in the book range far beyond the purview of Boggs's own life (from biological studies to cultural criticism), the most moving portions depict Boggs's conflicting waves of emotion as she waits to find out the ending to this particular portion of her story.

Boggs's novel opens with a protagonist who is also in a state of perpetual waiting. But Marianne Rogers's personal purgatory is mostly her own invention.

Ever since finishing her MFA in poetry, Marianne has pursued the life of an artist: she teaches enough to (barely) sustain a life in Brooklyn and spends most of her free time Skyping with her ex-fiancé-turned-best-friend, who has taken a teaching job in Dubai. She's working (but not really working) on a poetry manuscript entitled "The Ugly Bear List," a poetic litany of her favorite foes: climate change deniers, Big Tobacco, racists, the NRA, and so on. Grieving the loss of her mother and her growing estrangement from her sister, Marianne is sleepwalking through a life she has chosen but doesn't much seem to enjoy.

So when Eric, the ex-fiancé, offers her the chance to direct a low-residency writing program in Florida aimed at evangelical Christians, she scoffs but accepts. As an atheist Democrat, taking money from the Christian right doesn't seem like such a bad idea.

It turns out to be a terrible idea. Marianne quickly goes from languidly reading applications on the beach to juggling student complaints and pacifying protesters. To make matters worse, the start-up funds quickly dry up while the costs of running a newly fledged educational program accrue.

To the rescue comes a Christian corporation called God's Word God's World, investors brimming with cash who are seeding for-profit Christian schools all across the South. Their money, of course, comes attached to certain stipulations. Soon the workshops in which students wrestle with point-of-view and character development are replaced by online student seminars with titles like "Growing Your Audience Through Christian Tumblr and Pinterest Sites."

In the midst of this, Marianne has to negotiate her increasingly complex feelings for Eric who, in turn, takes off on a tour of the God's Word God's World schools with a too-attractive member of the corporation's business team. Also, there's a hurricane

on the horizon. A literal one.

It would be easy for the tone of this book to turn either too cynical or too saccharine. Often a novelist's instinct when confronting gulfs of various sorts (political, religious, emotional) is either to emphasize the vastness of the water that separates the two sides or to navigate a crossing that feels false or trite. Boggs resists both traps.

In part she accomplishes this through humor. She is adept at poking fun at all of her characters without sacrificing their humanity. When Eric first returns from Dubai and Marianne begins reconsidering their possibility as a couple, she muses:

He'd come back tanned and spoiled from Dubai . . . Everything overwhelmed him, and he needed to be talked down from negative thinking. But then, Marianne had to admit, so did she. It seemed that negativity and pessimism were necessary, essential, but heavy and unhealthy, like a bucket of third world water, which they passed back and forth between them.

Sometimes the humor comes from a juxtaposition of "Christian" speech with much more realistic and mundane details. Early on in the novel, a student named Davonte, a former R&B star who, because of a series of bad financial choices and substantial weight gain, has fallen out of the celebrity spotlight, explains his story to Marianne and asks her for a favor:

I lost who I was. I had some legal troubles. I started ordering in: pizzas, sub sandwiches. Weed. . . . But it was a bad solution. It messed up my voice and my confidence. I am borderline *diabetic*, Mary-Anne. This is not what God wanted for me. So I am learning to ask for people's help. And I am asking you to microwave my Lean Cuisines.

Perhaps most memorably, the novel illuminates the ways our political and religious beliefs are often rooted in the stories we tell ourselves about love and family. As the novel unfolds, we learn that Marianne's younger sister, Ruth, was conceived just as their mother, Theresa, was diagnosed with a serious illness. Ruth, who has few memories of her mother, interprets Theresa's choice not to abort as an extreme expression of maternal love. Marianne, who was 17 when her mother died, knew Theresa as an activist for women's rights as well as an artist and a teacher. Both

daughters make choice after choice in the novel, not so much out of political or religious devotion, but based on who they believe their mother was and who they think she would have wanted them to become.

The novel's title functions in two ways: the gulf is the setting as well as a term we use to describe the chasms that keep us apart from one another. But perhaps the book also asks us to see the latter in light of the former. It's possible to cross a gulf without walking on water—though the circuitous route is less direct, takes a great deal more patience, and requires that the traveler recognize that the ground she traverses is all part of the same land mass. Boggs's book is good enough to have you believing, for a little while at least, that the trip to the other side just might be worth it.