

Travis Mulhauser's debut opens in the first person with a gutsy 16-year-old tomboy called Percy setting off in a Michigan blizzard to find her junkie mother, who has fallen off the wagon and gone missing. Percy is one of the two Sweetgirls of the title; the other is the neglected baby girl she finds wailing next to an open window in an upstairs room of the drug-den farmhouse where her mother was last seen and where 25-year-old Shelton Potter and his girlfriend, Kayla, are crashed out. Percy considers whether she should 'go downstairs and suffocate that sonofabitch, Shelton, in his sleep'. But she decides instead to deliver the baby, named Jenna, to a hospital, helped by Portis Dale, her mother's ex-boyfriend and a former junkie, pursued by Shelton and his cronies. The gutsy girl and grumpy old guy duo is something of a cliché, but Portis is well drawn and their darkly humorous exchanges ring true. The only duff notes are the moments of Percy's inner monologue that sound saccharine or sententious, and the implausibly heavy symbolism of her mother's catastrophic reappearance, which causes Percy finally to give up on her for the baby's sake.

LAURA GALLAGHER

Percy's Progress

Sweetgirl

By Travis Mulhauser

(Fourth Estate 240pp £12.99)

It comes as a surprise, at the start of the fourth chapter, when the narrative voice switches to the third person: 'Shelton Potter woke in the middle of the night, bothered by the smell of dead dog.' This is the real debut. Thereafter, chapters alternate between voices and there are the obvious pleasures of seeing situations from two convincing perspectives. But it is the flawless portrayal of the flawed character Shelton that makes this novel so good. He is described as having 'a big, swollen-looking head, which he was sensitive about because he thought it made him look retarded'. He adores Kayla and Jenna (we don't know if he's the father), and as he sets out to recover the baby, dressed in a snowmobile suit, he imagines that 'Kayla would have blushed red had she seen how handsome

he could be when he took the time. It was his pectorals, yes, but what about that black visor? Shelton felt like a goddamn mystery in that visor, the sort of mystery a woman appreciated in a man.'

But Shelton has a bad drug problem, or 'what they would refer to in the scientific community as a compulsion', and knows he has 'squandered every opportunity he'd ever had in this world and ... ruined his life and several others.' There is no callow romanticising here. Instead, there is an appreciation of the truth and a resistance to the reductive thinking that at the end of the novel makes 'hardboiled journalists' report that 'the dead were all "drug users and dealers"', listing 'their criminal histories below their mugs like baseball statistics'. Shelton so lives and breathes – and is sometimes so idiotic – that when Mulhauser attempts to represent 'his last and summative thought, his bitter and tragic final realization', he actually pulls it off without the least mawkishness – a rare feat. But I won't reveal what this realisation is, because this book must be read.

To buy this book, see page 20. All titles arrive gift-wrapped by our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill.

Philip Womack's novels have always woven classical legend with dark, compelling children's fantasies set in the contemporary world. In *The Double Axe* he retreats fully into the dense shadows of classical antiquity to retell the Minotaur myth from the perspective of a teenage Cretan prince. This choice of subject has paid off richly.

Prince Deucalion Stephanos of Crete (known as Stephan), King Minos's second son, has looked up to Androgeos, his older brother, all his life. But when Androgeos is murdered in Athens, a terrible price must be paid – a blood price, according to Myrrah, the fearsome high priestess who sees auguries in the split carcasses of sacrificial beasts. Myrrah has already called down a curse upon the House of Minos: 'The stench of darkness is in your minds. And none of you – none of you – will escape it.' Suddenly elevated to the status of heir and regent, Stephan is acutely conscious of himself as young, unproved and second best. With the help of his resourceful sister Ari, however, he is determined to balk the

IMOGEN RUSSELL WILLIAMS

Bull's in Your Court

The Double Axe

By Philip Womack

(Alma Books 242pp £6.99)

curse, sift the truth from the court's poisonous mist of rumour, and find his way to the heart of Myrrah's mystery.

Womack's language contains repeated phrases that resonate like Homeric formulae (the mysterious 'lines filled with blood', for instance, that reveal themselves, at length, to be the grooves and passages of the labyrinth itself). It creates a chiaroscuro vision of bright joy and suffocating darkness, reminiscent of Mary Renault's earlier Theseus story, *The King Must Die*. The remorseless zeal of the inventor Daedalus, creating a 'machine, powered by sacrificial blood', and the grim, numinous forces the spilling of this blood might conjure up are set against the simple delights of being

alive and human: 'herby breads', 'glistening olives and dates', dancing, music, the love of family and the joy of growing into one's own skin and learning one's powers. Little Asterius, Minos's youngest son, far from being a monstrous hybrid, is simply a disabled child, tenderly cared for by his siblings and parents. There are dark forces at work here, but they do not spring from the expected source.

Womack's work, as ever, is not for the squeamish – Pasiphaë's alleged liaison with a bull is discussed (though not in graphic detail) and reeking animal bodies are laid out, at times, as though the book's pages are a butcher's window. But this stark treatment feels truthful, not overdone, congruent with the warlike landscape of the classical setting, in which boys and men must hunt and fight, and girls and women lacerate their cheeks to mourn their loss. Womack's fifth novel, unsettling, original and absorbing, shows him at the height of his powers. To buy this book, see page 20. All titles arrive gift-wrapped by our partner bookshop, Heywood Hill.