



**ST. LUCY'S
HOME FOR
GIRLS RAISED
BY WOLVES:
Stories
By Karen
Russell**

(Knopf, 2006)

Most of the 10 stories in Karen Russell's first collection take place in a surreal, exaggerated version of the Florida Everglades, where scooped-out crab exoskeletons double as beach sleds, and giant conch shells loom as large as houses. Within this fantastical setting, Russell charts the very real, often painful passage from childhood to maturity.

In "Ava Wrestles the Alligator," the 12-year-old title character experiences a "peculiar knot of fear and wonder" as she watches an invisible lover possess her writhing older sister. Ava's own mysterious encounter occurs off-page, and although something seedy has clearly taken place, we, like Ava, aren't entirely sure of its implications.

Russell isn't one for lengthy clarification, sometimes to a story's detriment. But this is a largely delightful book, whose recurring characters (Sawtooth, Raffy), place names (the Bowl-A-Bed Hotel), and event references (Tropical Storm Vita) link the frequently outlandish tales, rendering familiar their eccentric fictional world.

The collection ends with the title story, a lovely allegory of the gulf between adolescents and adults. Werewolf parents dispatch their feral but human daughters (the "condition skips a generation") to a cross between a reformatory and a finishing school. Beleaguered nuns coax their charges, baying and scratching, out of the pack mentality and into civilization. The girls' "final communal howl" is both triumphant and bittersweet—just like growing up.

[CAROLYN JURIS]