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A sticky marvel in the jungle

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CELLOPHANE □

By Marie Arana □

Dial Press, \$24, 384 pages

□ REVIEWED BY YAEL GOLDSTEIN □ □

□ I've never before been tempted to use the word "luscious" to describe a work of fiction, but "Cellophane," the debut novel by Marie Arana, whose 2001 memoir, "American Chica," was a finalist for the National Book Award, strikes me as demanding the adjective. □

The gorgeously evocative writing, fantastical jungle setting, and picaresque narrative that seems to cling to the border where high drama slides almost irresistibly into melodrama, together conspire to bring forth a reading experience so fully sensory that it's rather how I imagine it would feel to step into the Amazonian dreamscape in which the novel is set. □

The first impression one has upon entering the world of madly ambitious engineer Don Victor Sobrevilla and his family is of an extravagant proliferation of life, as exotic new plotlines sprout forth from nearly every page.

□ But as these stories gracefully twine around each other like so many greedy vines, it becomes the density that overwhelms one's senses: the delicious disorientation that comes from no longer caring where one thing ends and another begins, and instead simply reveling in the confusing tangle of an organic whole.

□ This idea of a dense, tangled unity -- what one character, Don Victor's Catholic priest, calls the "great connectedness of things," and another, Don Victor's shaman, calls "the great web that is this universe" -- is a major theme of "Cellophane." As is race, class, truth, desire, power and sin, just to name a few. Though this may sound like a great many subjects for a novel to tackle, the heady ideas mingle naturally

and easily with the general and unapologetic abundance pulsating through this book. □

To even attempt to do justice to all the plots, characters and opinions Ms. Arana folds into her universe would be an undertaking to rival in ambition the one that sets this family saga in motion: Don Victor's plan to transform his paper empire, tucked deep in the Amazon rainforest, into the Latin world's first and only producer of that marvel of mid-20th-century science, cellophane.

Most of the novel's strands are concerned with what happens as a result of -- or at least in surprising conjunction with -- the introduction of the clear paper into Peru's jungle. (The others bear, more or less, on how Don Victor came to create his factory and the hacienda, Floralinda, that surrounds it.)

□ Pre-cellophane Floralinda, which we see only briefly, is a fairy tale-like land, in which the Sobrevillas reign from a palace filled with mind-boggling inventions over the happy and hard-working natives. Except for the factory that churns out brown paper from state of the art American machinery, Floralinda is a timeless place, and news of the political unrest wracking 1950s Peru trickles in only through the letters sent by Don Victor's aunt Esther.

□ Why the Sobrevilla's isolated paradise is mortally imperiled by the introduction of cellophane is never made precisely clear, but the paper takes on strangely mystical -- or at least highly symbolic -- properties in the book, as much for its transparency (with suggestive echoes of Peru's preoccupation with skin color), as for its status as a model of modern ingenuity.

□ On the very day Don Victor succeeds in perfecting the recipe for the product the natives call "shine," unpleasant things start happening in the Sobrevilla household: First, a beloved dog is seized with a fatal coughing fit, and then the cook's grandson follows the dog to the grave, turning bright blue with his last breath.

□ But these events are only heralds of the real disaster to come: Within the next few days, a truth-telling plague descends over the hacienda, compelling its residents to spill secrets they've kept hidden for decades.

□ Don Victor torments his beloved wife, Dona Mariana, with recollections of his many infidelities; Dona Mariana scandalizes the

family by revealing her bizarre ancestry; two of the three Sobrevilla children declare themselves trapped in loveless marriages; and the third admits to the grinding loneliness she's felt since her brutish husband was banished by her father. Even the family priest gets in on the confessional action, cheerfully regaling the Sobrevillas with the details of his one and only love affair.

- As Floralinda is emptied of its secrets, it is left with a dangerous chasm, which ravenous desire races in to fill. Soon lust, instead of truth, is raging through the Sobrevilla household.

- But the hunger for love, like the hunger for unburdening, is only a gateway appetite, paving the way for that most destructive human desire -- the hunger for power. It is this final blight -- which the author terms "the plague of rebellion" -- that threatens to bring down all Don Victor has created, and in the process make a mockery of his conviction that, "This was the jungle, where power was decided by nature and a man's will to use it. Not by ridiculous little men in epaulets and gold braid."

- As Floralinda is pummeled by these three successive plagues, explanations abound, with everyone from the lowliest factory worker to the shaman and the priest weighing in with his theory regarding the evil unleashed on this remote jungle outpost.

- It is the shaman's words that seem to come closest to truth, which will not surprise readers of "American Chica," who are familiar with Ms. Arana's respectful fascination with Peru's folk mysticism. Only the witchman is wise enough to recognize the folly of our human attempts to interpret what is far beyond our comprehension: "You speak about truth as if it were light -- bright as the eye of that shine you are making. But truth is a stone, heavier than love. Only the spirits can carry it."

- To what extent the cellophane is really to blame for the events that unfold in Floralinda is ultimately impossible to say. Does his towering new ambition represent Don Victor's final betrayal of his original vision, his worship of tangible life, embodied in his aunt's warning that, "In the face of magnificent creation, man's symbols are paltry things?"

- Or is the cellophane instead a colorless reminder that the clash of different cultures will always breed discontent, fear and distortion? Or perhaps the cellophane is itself just one more distracting, ultimately meaningless symbol seized on by human minds too weak to accept that

when it comes to the why and how behind the patterns of life, there is no satisfying explanation to grasp hold of.

□ If at the end of the book you are actually bothered by the lack of an answer to this question, then, like Don Victor himself, you have failed to understand that, as the shaman says, the importance of the transparent paper is what it allows you to see through to: In our case, a breathtaking world, shimmering with warmth, humor and the dense interconnectedness of life, where a husband and wife can fall back in love because of a red-tassled cap worn by a love-besotted ancestor, and something as simple as a woman's dress can make "diamonds from shadow and flesh." □

□ *Yael Goldstein's debut novel, "Overture," will be published by Doubleday in January 2007.* □ □ □