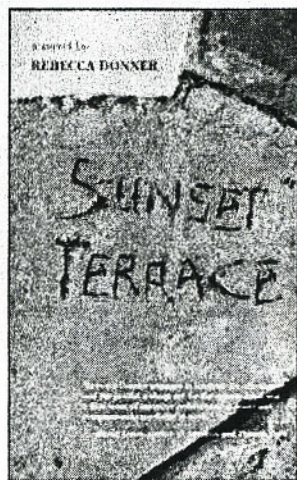


**Novels of May**

# Inversion, melancholy, parsimony



From old age we turn back to childhood, with Rebecca Donner's outstanding first novel, *Sunset Terrace* (MacAdam/Cage, 312 pages, \$22). Set in 1983 in the Los Angeles beach community of Santa Monica, the book takes place within the confines of a dilapidated apartment building populated by single mothers with low-income jobs and delinquent young children. Newcomers to the building are Elaine and her two daughters, Hannah and Daisy.

They are a broken, traumatized little family, having moved distractedly through 11 Western cities after the suicide three years earlier of Elaine's mentally ill husband. While Elaine struggles to support her family on a cook's meager salary, shy 9-year-old Hannah learns quickly how to negotiate the cliques of Sunset Terrace, befriending a foster child named Bridget who is even more damaged than she.

Elaine takes pity on Bridget as well, encouraging dinners and sleepovers, not realizing how destructive Bridget's influence on Hannah is growing to be. The danger mounts to a menacing climax at the novel's end, when Hannah is once again forced to confront a violent death, invoking the same overwhelming horror as the tragedy her family had been trying to outrun.

Donner's writing is nothing short of gorgeous, alive to the intricate hostilities between girls and the tangled alliances among women. The compassion she summons for the desperately sad children in this book is nearly crushing in its intensity. This is a remarkable debut.

*Donna Riskind is a former literary agent and magazine editor whose writing has been published by Commentary, the American Scholar, the New Criterion, The Wall Street Journal, the Times Literary Supplement, The Washington Post and The New York Times.*