



## spellbound

In Heidi Julavits's provocative new novel **The Uses of Enchantment** (Doubleday), sixteen-year-old Mary Veal vanishes from her West Salem, Massachusetts, prep school, Semmering Academy, one gloomy day in November 1985. Seven weeks later she reappears with short-term amnesia. Was she abducted? Or did she, like that Semmering sophomore from the seventies, Bettina Spencer, fake the whole thing? In combative meetings with her career-minded therapist, the

**PORTRAIT OF THE NOVELIST**  
A FRIEND OF THE  
AUTHOR'S PAINTED  
HER IN 2006.



precocious Mary, whose seventeenth-century ancestor was an accused witch, claims to have been under a spell—but she also mimics Dora, Freud's famously "deluded" patient. Getting nowhere, Dr. Hammer asks what question she'd like to be asked: "I would like to be asked if I enjoyed myself," Mary responds.

But sex is a forbidden subject in the Veal household, a marvelously rendered environment of classic New England repression. Paula Veal can't accept her daughter as sexual; she's a victim or a liar—and disgraced either way. *Enchantment* puts a thornier question to the reader: Is memory so reliable anyway? Is it inextricable from fantasy? This is Julavits's territory, covered in the wonderfully twisty *The Effect of Living Backwards*. Here Mary's therapy sessions and the chapters that recount her disappearance (titled "What Might Have Happened") are either fascinating or vexing, depending on your tolerance for uncertainty. Relief comes in the funny and increasingly poignant pages that show Mary, age 30, shell-shocked by her mother's death, longing now, tragically too late, for that least complicated blessing: forgiveness.—TAYLOR ANTRIM *books* >306