

Olivia Robinson. The Blue Moth Motel

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BOOK REVIEW

Olivia Robinson. *The Blue Moth Motel*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-55081-911-3

Olivia Robinson's debut novel *The Blue Moth Motel* offers a quietly powerful contemplation of family, memory, and identity, suffused with a palpable sense of melancholic joy. Structurally, the novel alternates between a first-person present in 2013 — told from soloist Ingrid's point of view in Lewes, UK — and a third-person past focused on Ingrid's childhood and family in Prince Edward Island before she moved to England in 2010 at the age of 17. Although focused on Ingrid, the novel weaves an intergenerational coming-of-age narrative with Ingrid and her sister, Norah (one year older, held back so she could start school with Ingrid), at its centre, but with their mother, Laurel, and grandmother, Ada, quickly established as central characters whose own stories are told and filtered through the perspectives of Ingrid and Norah. Ada is the proprietor of the Blue Moth Motel, a struggling family business situated near a sewage lagoon that discourages many of the tourists looking for the charm of Anne of Green Gables or Cavendish. Laurel raises her daughters with her partner, Elena, at the motel. Refreshingly, the narrative exists in an almost exclusively female world. The girls' father left before Ingrid was born, and Ada's husband died in a trucking accident when Laurel was young. Teachers and mentors — the ones that matter — are all women. The art and literature the characters consume are likewise sororal, and the novel proliferates with allusions to Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. Aspiring musicians trained by their grandmother, Ingrid and Norah

“only perform pieces composed by women” (70). Men are only tangentially present and of incidental importance, such as the boy in seventh grade who feels entitled to proclaim Ingrid his girlfriend or the school principal who fails — or doesn’t care — to understand an incident of homophobic bullying in which Ingrid and Norah are mocked for not shaving their legs in tenth grade (“Your *moms* probably don’t shave either” [149]). Nevertheless, men still exist as a hegemonic force exerting a palpable influence over the world these women inhabit. Ingrid is still suspended by the principal for retaliating against her bully: the gym teacher, Ms. Smith, sympathizes with Ingrid but remains silent during the meting out of punishment because “it wasn’t her place to say otherwise” (150–51).

Indeed, feminine sound and silence establish the thematic core of the novel. Music is supremely important in *The Blue Moth Motel*, introduced when Ada brings a piano to the motel and teaches Ingrid to sing and Norah to play the instrument. Music initiates a bond between the sisters and their grandmother that comes to dominate the novel, and music expresses an unspoken range of emotions and experiences. And yet, so much is left unsaid between the characters, and Ada remains a cypher to her granddaughters, who — despite their bond — only come to know her and her history through other people. Silence likewise initiates the novel, which begins with Ingrid in 2013 being diagnosed with damaged vocal chords that, in order to heal, will require three months without singing and with very limited speaking. In the chapters set in the present in the UK, Ingrid can only communicate and interact with others via gestures and written notes, leaving the reader alone with her introspection and memories, with Ingrid’s literal voice only heard in the PEI past. Reflecting on the power she felt the first time she sang into a microphone at a young age, we are told that “It wasn’t until much later that Ingrid realized there are people who don’t like it when girls raise their voices” (70), a poignant comment in a novel about (among other things) queer identity and focused on speaking up and singing out as well as on silences that can provide comfort or obfuscate.

True to the structural balance between past and present, Robinson juggles dichotomous themes of hope and regret, love and grief, and aspiration and trepidation, and in the process perfectly captures a sense of in-betweenness and the joyful anxiety of trying to choose the right path in life. Narratively, *The Blue Moth Hotel* is not splashy, foregrounding the slow growth and gradual maturation of Ingrid and Norah, a narrative that remains purposefully ambiguous and incomplete. Living in the UK in her very early twenties, Ingrid receives an invitation from Norah to attend the Blue Moth Extravaganza at the motel, a celebration of the emergence of ghostlike blue moths at dusk on the summer solstice. This emergence is an event of myth and magic that resides in the stories told by Ada about her family's founding of the Blue Moth Motel that captured the imagination of the sisters when they were young, and they are determined to revive the party, even though — or perhaps because — no one living has ever actually seen the moths. The true significance of the Extravaganza becomes apparent as the novel progresses, and the invitation serves as a powerful call home to Ingrid, even as “home” evokes a complex mixture of emotions as a place both longed for and to which you can never truly return. The great strength of the novel lies in Robinson's ability to capture the many, often ambiguous, facets of home and family, well suited to her subtle and fluid prose.

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