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So Much Pretty

by Cara Hoffman,

Simon & Schuster, 2011, 304 pages

“I wrote *So Much Pretty* because I wanted to talk about family and community and the ways in which things that have become familiar to us are often not what they seem, are rife with meanings that elude our selective senses, that turn us into unwitting accomplices, secret sharers of observable but unspeakable things. Our desires for security, or belonging or freedom suddenly becoming the weight that sinks us . . . I wanted to discuss how well meaning people are often complicit in destroying the things they most want to preserve.”

— Cara Hoffman from www.carahoffman.com

I picked up *So Much Pretty* looking to escape the world and its many disappointments. What I found instead was a story that could very well happen in my community, to my friends, to their children . . . a terrifying prospect.

And yet, I kept reading.

As the suspense mounted, as a girl went missing, as the chapters began to be numbered as police evidence, I could not turn away. The unfortunate universal appeal of Hoffman’s dark tale of abduction and rape lies in the uncomfortable familiarity of its subject matter.

As difficult as this book is to accept as a reflection of our culture, many of us are relieved to hear a story like this one spoken out loud, relieved to know that others are devastated with anger and sadness, and that we are not alone.

Cara Hoffman’s novel gives us a glimpse into its author’s life experience. Her work as an investigative reporter on both crime and environmental issues gives her a unique perspective that allows her to make the links between the way we treat the earth and animals, and the way we treat one another. The author’s emancipated youth as a wandering agricultural worker also gives her the palette for what is arguably the protagonist of *So Much Pretty*, an unusually bright teenager named Alice.

There is a sort of grayness to Haeden, New York, the fictional small town where most of the story in *So Much Pretty* takes place. Amidst industrial farm pollution, sexual tension, unhappiness, and some thing far more subtle, a quiet violence rumbling under the surface, people raise their families, work, and live.

This setting is contrasted with New York City, where Claire, Gene, and their young daughter Alice live prior to moving to Haeden. At the free clinic where Claire works in the city, the aftermath of an unspoken, almost “planned” violence is evident on the bodies of the women and children she treats.

The wounds Claire treats in Manhattan are deafening in their prevalence, and although she tries to drown the images out and carry on “doing the right thing” by working long hours away from her partner and child, she ends up feeling overwhelmed and helpless.

Besides Claire and Gene with their philosophical anarchism, the book introduces us to an array of Haeden’s somnambulant residents and to Alice.

Alice’s character is a medley of influences; a confirmed pragmatist and accomplished science student, an idealist, writing school essays on Situationism, an animal lover, a hunter, swimmer, and gymnast.

Alice is a beautiful archetype of a next generation anarchist, so to speak, and through her Hoffman ably addresses current tensions in radical circles between a younger, more action oriented tendency and a generally older, more tentatively intellectual tendency (think *Crimethink* vs. Chomsky).

The move to Haeden is meant to give Gene and Claire a guilty new start, far from the constant trauma of the city, yet the town may be quieter than the couple had hoped. Gene soon finds he can only get so far with his plans for a united, politically active community and Claire ends up retreating into a silence of quiet rage she cannot quite express to the women she meets in the area.

The silence Claire keeps is only one of many silences in *So Much Pretty*; there is silence about pesticides and manure leeching into Haeden’s groundwater, there is silence about misogyny and good old-fashioned sexism, and there is an especially disturbing silence around Wendy White’s sudden disappearance.

Alice, like so many people at that strange and powerful point between childhood and adulthood, struggles to understand her parents’ desire to escape back to the land that is so different from her own need to face the reality of the world in all of its brutality.

One thing that begins to define her, as she reaches adolescence and as she comes to terms with what has presumably happened to Wendy, is her body and its sex. Realizing the risks she runs in simply inhabiting a woman’s body leads Alice to make an important decision about what her “ethical obligations” are towards Wendy, her own family, and Haeden.

Alice’s pragmatic nature leads her to consider the silence around Wendy White to be ethically unacceptable. “It would hardly be rational,” she explains, “to accept that I live inside a thing made of flesh that people capture, hide, and then wait in line to rape.”

Although *So Much Pretty* predominantly gives voice to Claire, Gene, and Alice, the novel is laid out as a series of perspectives that reveal what is being kept quiet and why.

Among those lending perspective are men and women, parents and children, a cop, a reporter, an abductor and his victim. It is through having access to all of these voices that the reader is able to pick their way through the evidence and arrive at Alice’s moment of action feeling they can understand, if not approve of, her choice.

Although we could see in this story a triumph of action over ideals, we can also see it as a compromise. After all, could Alice ever have made the choice to take risks in the name of justice without those bedtime readings of radical environmentalist Derrick Jensen?

Could any of us consider seeking social justice without inspiration from the political analysis of an Emma Goldman or a Grace Boggs?

Whether *So Much Pretty* brings us to identify with Alice or not, Hoffman leaves us no doubt that her intentions are noble and come from a place of deep love and outrage.

May we at least identify with Alice for her courage and intentions, as well as with her parents for choosing to seek change through building and repairing community.

There is a need for both.