



The Ghost's Child

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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In interviews, Sonya Hartnett insists that she writes for herself and any readers who might value what she writes. Those readers might be 15 or ? especially in the instance of this novel ? 80 years old. Some writers may enjoy more numerous readerships, but very few offer such haunting satisfactions; and even fewer select each word with such precision. As a consequence, sentences constantly surprise anticipation. The prose provides pleasures we expect from a poem; and like a poem, this text invites re-reading both along the way and after completion.

Maddy is an old lady who comes home from walking her dog to find a boy sitting on her settee. His identity and responses to the story she tells him provoke implicit questions which become insistently important. She begins with her childhood in what we infer to be a late 19th-century town by the sea. Given her name ? Matilda Victoria Adelaide ? it is no surprise that the spiritual world she draws upon for comfort is that of the Dreamtime, her main confidante being the mythical nargun. Her strict parents are emotionally barren towards their child, apart from a single year when her father flickers into life as he takes her on a world tour to answer the question, ?What is the world?s most beautiful thing?? She finds *her* most beautiful thing, for a while, with Feather, a boy she discovers on the beach cradling a pelican. He seems to have no history; he simply is. They marry, expect a child, but Maddy miscarries. The couple come to see that Feather?s notion of meaning differs from hers. He leaves in quest of contentment, which for him would be inward, self-absorbed. In time, Maddy sails after him, alone in a small sailing vessel, encountering as she voyages creatures of the deeps, with whom she converses, often amusingly. She needs to ask Feather a question: ?How can you know love, and lose it, and go on living without it, and not feel the loss forever?? Finding Feather brings Maddy answers to other questions about herself.

At this point, Maddy?s story can now shift from a world where literal truth is never certain to the absolute realities of World War One. Maddy has grown to live with her own vulnerability ? knowing there is no continuing solution to that all-important question. Not without regret, she chooses a life alone, nursing the wounded and a subsequent medical career restoring sight to others.

It is impossible here to reflect the beauty of this text ? the notes above might suggest pretension. You need to taste Hartnett?s language, to live the pace of the story, to test its apparent simplicity. You need to dwell within the form of the ? what? Poem, allegory, fable, sustained metaphor ? each of these. As with all enduring stories, it feels like a gift.

Haunting indeed.

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