

The Serpent's Veil, Maggi Feehan

Prairie Fire Review of Books, July, 2009

Maggi Feehan's debut novel, *The Serpent's Veil*, twists and turns like a narrow Irish road, and carries us around bends to new and unexpected places. The story opens with a bizarre image of a father pressing his hand on his daughter's head underwater. What sort of man creates such a violent act and how does this act shape the character of the daughter? Does this actually happen? Or is it a dream?

This image is only one of many. They come as dreams and ghosts and are an integral part of Feehan's novel, occupying much of the main character Constance Stubbington's mind.

Constance wakes up in Guy Hospital in London, England, her pelvis having been crushed in a horrific riding accident, and has no recollection of what happened. When she asks after her father, the doctors and staff avoid answering her question. And so she dreams. What do her dreams imply? Is her father the bully portrayed? Is he a ghost? The only person who is sympathetic to her predicament is the dresser, Ank Maguire, a man with a misspelled name, troubles and dreams of his own.

This novel flashes back to Constance's childhood and leaps across continents, taking us to 19th-century India, where Constance lives with her father. She is under the watchful eye of her Ayah, but Constance is an independent child and when the Ayah is busy she often talks with the mali (gardener), who fills her head with tales of Shiva and Parvati. Constance's mind and eyes are on snakes; she is afraid of them and what harm can come to her because of them. But the mali tells her, "the English only half understand, see only the part of snakes they fear. What about Kundalini, the coiled-up snake in us all?" (53)

Snakes consume a good portion of her life, and as an adult, Constance contemplates the mali's advice and thinks: "She must birth it, allow it to slide from the lightless corner of her mind and embalm the ward." (73) By releasing the serpent within her, by storing her past on the wall of the ward, Constance finds the strength to survive her accident. Feehan then shifts to Ank Maguire. Immigrating to Canada from Ireland after a tragic family fire, he travels to the wilds of British Columbia, where he lives with Bree, his dead uncle's wife. Addicted to opium, she leads a precarious life, and gradually Ank turns his attention to Emma, a young British girl who becomes a friend. Later she disappears. Ank endures this misfortune as well as others by having conversations with his dead mother (this he began shortly after his mother died), who appears to be the only stable thing--albeit a ghost--in his young life.

And all the while in the present, Constance and Ank's friendship blooms into love. Eventually they marry and together try to find solace from their respective tragedies. This is a sad tale, with deaths and tragedies abounding, but above all the despair is the resilience of the human spirit. It rises in different shapes and fashions the characters into the beings they are meant to be.

I usually read books to understand what the characters have to say about life, what universal truths lie on the page. I want to embrace what I read and relish that discovery long after the book is closed. I put this book down with a feeling there was something missing, that the work was unfinished. And yet after much reflection, I recognized that, through her sensitivity to those on the other side, to her father and her sons, Constance learns not to be afraid of this life, and to say goodbye to her ghosts. She lets go, stepping away from the

serpent's veil and into her future. Although the physical and the otherworldly are not that far apart, she is meant to follow a different path.

Perhaps the answer lies in the quotation: "In my head the light of a thousand suns rise" (263). As Constance bids farewell to her loved ones, she begins to see that it will take a thousand years for the spirit to reach realization. It will take a thousand suns for us to see the light of our selves.

Feehan emerges as a bright young star and it will be interesting to see what other works she has in store for us in the future. — Mary Barnes

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.