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After Alice by Karen Hofmann

Dania Tomlinson

University of British Columbia

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***After Alice* by KAREN HOFMANN**
NeWest, 2014 \$19.95

Reviewed by **DANIA TOMLINSON**

Sidonie von Taler, a middle-aged, divorced, childless, and retired academic, is the main character of Karen Hofmann's debut novel, *After Alice*. After forty years away, Sidonie has returned to the rural Okanagan community where she grew up and the memories and secrets that continue to haunt that landscape. Here, Sidonie reunites with the strangers that make up her family: her older sister Alice's children, whose faces constantly confront Sidonie with Alice's difficult memory. Although, as the title suggests, the novel takes place after Alice's death, her absence pervades the text. The mystery of the events and details surrounding Alice's death drive the narrative of *After Alice* and are not exposed until Sidonie herself is able to face the ghosts and monsters of the past.

Karen Hofmann is a professor of English and creative writing at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops. Her collection of poetry, *Water Strider*, was shortlisted for a BC Book Prize in 2009. Hofmann's poetic prowess is obvious in her prose. She aptly blends the lyric of landscape with an almost scientific eye for ethnographic and topographic details:

The lake, like a great creature rolling out its own bed, undulating from the foot of the cool, damp Monashees in the north a hundred kilometres south to the desert, with its Blue Racers and scorpions, its petroglyphs, its prickly pear.

After Alice often reads like poetry. Hofmann has an ear for rhythm and voice. Her writing

is lush and luminous without being purple. Although written in the third-person point of view, the perspective is so close to Sidonie's own that descriptions not only paint the scene, but also expose Sidonie's character. The narrator reveals the world as Sidonie sees it. In this way, Hofmann's poetics do not overshadow her main character or crowd the narrative, but successfully enliven the prose.

After Alice is a novel about place. Although it has been decades since Sidonie has been back to the Okanagan, "the landscape is familiar to her as her own body." It forces her to face the memories she tried to escape when she moved away to Montreal as a young woman. The Okanagan landscape keeps time. Even the spaces that have been developed and modernized remind her powerfully of what they once were. It is through place that she experiences "a slippage in time," like a ravine she falls into, or "body memory, trip-alarmed by walking among the trees."

Sidonie is drawn to the past more forcefully than to the present. She sees her memories in layers:

the images all ranged one behind the other, like one of those stylized watercolours of mountain ranges. Only instead of retreating into mistiness, her memory-images become sharper the further they are in the past.

Memories constantly intrude upon Sidonie's present. Hofmann's writing enacts her experience of the past. The narrative seamlessly enters into flashback, seldom signaling the shift in time to the reader. This is a writing technique I have rarely seen done so successfully. As Sidonie contemplates the landscape, she exists in

two times at once and brings the reader along with her. In both the story and the written text, the past haunts the present.

The climatic moments of the narrative are located in Sidonie's flashbacks; therefore, much of this novel takes place inside Sidonie's head. Since the third-person point of view is so close to Sidonie's own, it is difficult for me to accept that the reader cannot have direct access to Sidonie's knowledge of Alice's death. Hofmann withholds valuable information from the reader for the sake of suspense. I understand Hofmann's decision to use the third-person perspective in order to increase the narrative drive by controlling the gradual revelation of Sidonie's past and the events surrounding her sister's death, but there are times when this device shows through and I can see the author behind the writing. Since the tension of the narrative is located in the past and communicated through flashbacks, the plot itself sags. The present pales next to the memory it reflects.

Raised in the very community upon which Hofmann's novel is based (although she gives it a pseudonym), I find her local details spot on. In fact, I can trace Sidonie's movement through various regions of the Okanagan depending solely on Hofmann's descriptions of the landscape and human-made structures. While Hofmann's precise use of familiar details is thrilling to me, a local, her prose suffers at times because of her compulsion to get the particulars right:

She has driven north along Highway 97, past the new supermarkets and gas stations, the Esso and the Petrocan, the A&W, the McDonalds. Past the old plaza, built in the early

60s, with the CIBC, the IGA, the bakery and liquor store, the little one-story buildings re-fronted, patched up, painted, this decade beige and burgundy, bearing new signs, but still recognizable.

The novel slows and snags on these specifics. That said, *After Alice* is concerned with the minutiae of life. Trivialities are given significant weight. I collected these details like clues to the various mysteries scattered throughout the novel. While some of these mysteries are satisfyingly resolved, others are left hanging. In this same way, the ending introduces a new mystery and gapes open obnoxiously, making me feel a little cheated.

These shortcomings are nothing next to the joy I experienced reading *After Alice*. Hofmann's fresh descriptions of the Okanagan Valley, intriguing characterization and development of Sidonie, and careful and creative use of flashbacks are reward enough. Hofmann's writing is clever and imaginative with a narrative pull.

After Alice is a novel about the black sheep, skeletons, and strangers in every family and the threads that pull these pieces together. I would especially recommend this novel to anyone who appreciates careful, well-crafted prose, or anyone interested in the history of the Okanagan, family secrets, or the pull of memory.

DANIA TOMLINSON is a new mom from Winfield, BC. She is completing the final weeks of her MFA at UBC Okanagan. Her creative writing thesis is a magic realist novel based in Okanagan Centre, BC, and Valparaiso, Chile.