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High, Clear Warning: Mental Health and Environmental Toxicity in *High Clear Bell of Morning*

***High Clear Bell of Morning* by ANN ERIKSSON**

Douglas & McIntyre, 2014 \$22.95

Reviewed by **LAURI CHOSE**

Warnings about the damaging effects of environmental pollutants on human health are prolific; for this reason, most readers of *The Goose* will not be surprised to discover a novel emphasizing the failing physical and psychological health of mammals whose blood tests reveal high levels of toxic chemicals such as pesticides, PCBs, flame retardants, and heavy metals. Anne Eriksson's *High Clear Bell of Morning* offers a profound message about the effects of toxins on human health while acting as an agent for change in an exposé about the state of a health care system grossly underequipped to care for patients suffering with mental illnesses. Readers will likely recognize the parallel structure of this book: written in the spirit of other greats like Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, which posits human health against a perilous landscape, the narrative of *High Clear Bell of Morning* forces readers to confront the reality of a father desperate to save a daughter reeling out of control while uncovering shocking evidence that her psychological health is intrinsically connected with the death of L46, a killer whale recently found dead off the Canadian coast.

The novel opens with Glen and Colin, both marine biologists, working against time as a rising tide threatens to

reclaim the body of L46 before the necropsy can be completed. This opening scene introduces the sense of urgency essential to the novel as Glen begins his investigation into the whale's death—a complicated task because L46 shows no overt signs of illness or injury. Glen is introduced to readers in a scene of environmental emergency—a theme that resonates throughout the novel. He is a character intricately connected to both the Western Canadian seascapes and whale pods to which he has dedicated his life and work, and he soon finds connections that make him believe the whale's death is closely connected with tragic events in his own life.

Although this opening scene is disturbing and the early death of the whale brutal, readers are treated with the beautiful imagery of Eriksson's prose juxtaposed alongside the tragic fate of killer whale L46. Eriksson, a biologist whose own experience working with the toxicology data of killer whales, adds scientific credibility to the novel, skillfully weaving her expertise into fascinating descriptions of the whale pods and their environments, painting a picture of the raw, haunting beauty bestowed on this region. From the early description of the sea air ringing in Glen's ears, "like the sound of a bell, high and clear" just before coming upon the sight of L46's birth, to the lingering descriptions of whales in song, Eriksson's delivery of this landscape is a certain strength of the novel.

Ruby, Glen's college-age daughter, is introduced through Glen's flashback of her as a young, inquisitive six-year-old out on her father's boat when L46 is born. We learn that Ruby's personality has recently

changed, and Glen compares his daughter's erratic behaviors to the difficulty of describing the complexity of the "mournful chorus" of whale song. The author successfully establishes a connection: in both circumstances there is a lack of understanding about the situation at hand. The whales live and communicate in systems with complexities that even after a lifetime of study elude Glen and his colleagues. Similarly, Ruby's diagnosis is one that is steeped in misunderstanding. Ruby, who is as intrinsically connected to the seascape as her father, is diagnosed with both schizophrenia and drug dependency—a common dual diagnosis. This complicated diagnosis challenges the entire family and their previously stable, if not idyllic, household. Glen, who feels like Ruby is "wrapped in fishing line and drowning," remains committed to his disturbed daughter and goes to great extremes to help her as their lives reel out of control. While Glen is faithfully committed to saving his daughter, the novel realistically shows the lack of treatment options available to patients, the strain on families, and damage to the human spirit that goes hand-in-hand with mental illness and dual diagnoses.

The book's focus is as much about mental illness as it is about environmental concern; in fact, neither plot line can exist without the other as Glen's investigation into L46's death leads him to startling conclusions about the possible causes of his daughter's illness. Connections between environmental pollutants and mental health diagnoses may not yet be scientifically conclusive; however, the mental health field is one where many questions still remain, and some research indicates

environmental factors may contribute to the onset of schizophrenia. These unanswered questions only drive Glen's search for answers, as mental illness remains a misunderstood and stigmatic disease. Eriksson's portrayal of the powerlessness felt by all involved is a theme that remains consistent and adds to the strength of the novel.

Glen's feelings of helplessness culminate in a surprising conclusion. The ending comes quickly, a possible drawback of the book as readers might hope for a little more detail and the slowing down of time. If anything, the book is *too* ambitious in both the actions and outcomes of the characters, especially when important issues such as Ruby's accusations of molestation are introduced and resolved in less than three pages. Perhaps the author wants the reader to feel bombarded by the action that comes quickly in the novel: through the rapid progression of events, readers may feel that they, too, are amidst the emotional drowning that occurs as characters are faced with overwhelming obstacles. Eriksson successfully delivers this devastating sense of chaos as lives spin out of control in this novel; however, this quick delivery may be too fast for some readers.

High Clear Bell of Morning is a work of fiction, but one that effectively exposes both the fragility of ecosystems on the brink and failing mental health systems, all the while raising good questions about connections between the two fields. The book will appeal to readers who are interested in the struggle of families dealing with schizophrenia as well as readers interested in the cause-and-effect

relationship between human health and environmental toxicity.

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