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Song Motes: a review of *Winter Wren*

***Winter Wren* by THERESA KISHKAN**

Fish Gotta Swim Editions, 2016 \$18.00

Reviewed by **VIVIAN HANSEN**

This little book is delightful in both its narrative and the physical style of the book itself. The returning literary theme of a woman escaping conflict is still a draw. Grace returns to Canada to find peace and reflective beauty in her outer and inner landscape.

Winter Wren is a sequel to *The Age of Water Lilies* (2009). Grace Oakden, the daughter of Flora Oakden of *Water Lilies*, has returned to a west-coast beach after leaving a broken relationship in France. Grace buys Tom Winston's land, renews the beauty of its hideaway corners and the small miracle of the Winter Wren.

Tom is a catalyst for Grace's understanding of this unique place as he struggles with his daily life in a nursing home. We hear his sorrow in how his father claimed First Nations' artifacts for the museum. Tom has his own sorrows as a veteran of the First World War, and his search for healing on the land he claimed many years before. The Winter Wren had been his music. He collected a whale vertebra to decorate his land. As a directive to Grace the painter he says: "bring me the view at dusk" (62). She knows what he means, painting finally nine separate palettes.

This is a surprisingly complex novella that draws on poetic language to emit the beauty of painting and its peace. Grace

wanted a vocabulary for the serene wash of Jordan River into the sea, the meeting of water and sky, dull as

pewter until a cloud parted and light melted down. The angle of a winter wren perched on the vertebra. Wanted a colour for the sound of wind in trees containing a multitude of ravens. (65)

The style in this novella compels toward a ghostly understanding of each character. There are no dialogue tags. We must discern which character is speaking when. Although a bit disconcerting, this lack offers a ghostly presence to each character; blending them into the narrative mix. Minor characters lift from the narrative. Andy McIntyre, Grace's new lover who is a potter, seems to stabilize her and offer some plot value in addition to his knowledge about old Tom. Freya, a thirteen-year old girl, shows up much too late in the work, offering some sense of symbolic renewal. I wanted more of her, but I hope Kishkan has some use for her in a sequel.

Despite these minor intros, the novella seems only superficially about humans. It is more about the prickly relationship between human life and the natural, healing world. The sense of separation of land and nature and character is less distinct. The song of the wren might as well be the sound of human speech. It is in this quick twist of narrative convention that Kishkan finds a turn of genius. In evaluating the characters, we must deploy the narrative rule of distinction in text; we are the wren, the whale vertebrae, the very view at dusk.

Kishkan is also masterful at shifting the role of telling. Her simplicity of stating "Grace walks into the library" (69) offers a greyscale to the narrative that pushes against the senses. The writing style preserves the latitude of dusk—that

ephemeral sight that refuses precise colour and the unusual tenor of light.

The book offers an apprenticeship in place: a wide narrative motion in the larger trope of a female character who finds, in nature, her natural catalyst toward healing. Tom's character reveals the conflict between the artifact and ephemera that is so prevalent in the interaction between human and natural worlds. As a bird taxidermist, he describes his hunt:

It was so tiny. The wren let him approach and quick as anything he had it in the net, dropping it into a bag with a small cloth soaked in chloroform. The light in the dark eye went out . . . He was sure it was the source of the notes he had so carefully transcribed, listening and

asking himself, was that little run e-g-e-c? Are they sixteenth notes? Now there? A rising run, g-b-d-g? That was the bird he had drawn, its pert tail and brown legs. And probably this was that very wren. (122-23)

Kishkan accomplishes a great deal in this work. Her poetics and sense of a narrative molding, using the conventions of fiction and creative nonfiction, allows a poetic prose to emerge from *Winter Wren*. This is a style that promises to create an emerging form in the genre of Canadian novella.

VIVIAN HANSEN is a Calgary poet and creative nonfiction writer.