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Perdita by Hilary Scharper

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***Perdita* by HILARY SCHARPER**

Touchstone, 2013 \$19.99

Reviewed by **NICOLE BARTLEY**

Perdita is a novel for birders, painters, and “incorrigible romantics.” Readers become students of ornithologists, appreciators of art, and amateur historians. They’ll close the book with magic filtering through their memories, and they’ll wonder at nature’s influence and loyal friendships that span multiple lifetimes. The mystery surrounding the main character, Marged, will keep them intrigued, the nature details and simple writing will keep them interested, and, by halfway, they will be completely invested in both the characters and the plots’ resolutions.

The novel follows Marged’s life as she chronicles her professional growth in Canada as well as an unresolved love triangle. It also follows Garth (a historian and the other main character) as he tries to determine whether Marged is actually 134 years old or senile, and if there is a supernatural element surrounding her. Lyrical scenes containing moments of profound insight fill much of the novel, specifically from Marged’s diary chapters. For example, during an intellectual evening, Scharper writes,

Their words tested each other in a way that intrigued me—each man with his own hammer striking the other’s surface with skill, and listening for the true ring of steel. At times they did it with seriousness and at others with humour, but I felt them drawing out that deep sound from one another . . . the sound of a good man.

Despite beautiful passages such as this, the novel reads as if more effort was placed on Marged’s diary entries than the framing subplot. Garth and Clare’s budding but underdeveloped romance seems as if it were merely an afterthought. Their relationship feels both forced and juvenile, and their dialogue often reads like teenagers playing at being adults. For example, Scharper writes,

“Let’s see—“ I folded my arms. “You must be—hmm, let me see, around forty or forty-one now.”

“What!” She lifted a pillow and tossed it at me. “You know perfectly well I’m six years older than you are—almost to the day!”

“Will you believe me if I say it’s because you’re prettier?” I said, reaching out to catch the pillow. “Honestly, Clare, I mean it. You really do look wonderful.”

She placed her hand lightly on Mars’s collar and smiled over at me. “That’s a nice thing for you to say. But you were always nice to me. By the way, why were you always nice to me?”

“Who wouldn’t be nice to you? You were a very sweet little girl—always my father’s favorite.”

She sighed. “Those were the days!”

Not only is the timing off, such as how long it takes a pillow to sail through the air, but the section above feels as if it’s from a sappy romance’s script. Scharper is unwilling to set Garth and Clare free to determine the course of dialogue and story; the characters are saying only what she wants in order to convey back-story, which

makes their interactions stiff, disingenuous, quick, and sloppy.

This doesn't mean the novel is boring. As one mystery unveils, another emerges or becomes more complex, and more than one subplot isn't resolved until the last chapter. As the story progresses, readers can amuse themselves by finding overt parallels between Garth and Clare's romance and Marged's over-arching plot. The result is almost dramatic irony because readers, who have guessed the truth in the first couple of chapters, are merely waiting for events to unfold.

If Marged's story doesn't pull readers in, then the setting will. Place is a strong character, particularly the bay and surrounding forests. As seen through Marged's eyes, the bay is fickle, peaceful, stable, dangerous, and "so glorious and sparkling, though but three weeks ago it had been a fiend." Readers will fall in love with Marged's wilderness while she strives to determine where her heart belongs. Scharper makes this easy because of her deft inclusion of the fantastic, which turns a literary exploration of love and purpose into a romp through magical realism. Sprinkled throughout the story are fairytale-like elements that construct the novel's foundation: sentient personification of nature, a longer-than-normal lifespan, and real-life mythological beings. The bay, the wind, the trees—all are equal, fully realized characters that deserve as much attention as Marged, Garth, their various lovers, and—of course—Perdita.

By the end of the novel, readers are free to let their imaginations play. They'll hardly remember most of the story's forgivable downfalls. Marged's story is just too intriguing to put down, and the setting too solid to leave. Scharper will make readers look out their windows and wonder

what the trees are saying about them, whether the wind guides or pushes them around, and if they have known a great love.

NICOLE BARTLEY is a magical realism and speculative fiction writer. She recently obtained her master's degree in fiction from Chatham University with a concentration in literary publishing. She is an avid reader and a copy editor. She hopes to maintain jobs around books—be it writing, editing, publishing, reviewing, or selling them. She is currently a book reviewer for *Coal Hill Review* and the reviews editor for *Weave Magazine*. Her creative work has appeared in *Separate Worlds*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, and *The Holiday Cafe*.