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Buddhism, Youth, the Forest: The Jumbled Tales of Curran's *Blood Fable*

***Blood Fable* by OISÍN CURRAN**

BookThug, 2017 \$20.00

Reviewed by **MICHAEL OCCHIONERO**

I'll have to apologize straight out of the gate for my own mixed feelings about Curran's novel. Truth be told, there is a lot of good to be gleaned from *Blood Fable*, though certain elements of Curran's perhaps overly ambitious delivery did peeve this reader's practiced eye.

The novel begins under a veil of mystery that only very slowly lifts as the reader moves through the very spare descriptions of setting that Curran offers. Frankly, had it not been for the novel's back blurb, I do not know that I would have been able to situate the setting as an isolated Buddhist community in the woods until very near to the end of the novel.

Curran's novel filters through the narration of its protagonist, an unnamed ten-year-old boy. Perhaps this explains the feelings of fuzziness and groundlessness that reflect the boy's limited grasp of the world around him. What cannot be explained, however, is the impossible intelligence of a presumably homeschooled ten-year-old confined to the woods and yet still capable of similes such as, "A male peacock [...] staggered [...] like an eighteenth-century debutante straying from a ball" (33), and the sharp-tongued critique of the "the self-congratulatory decrepitude of the professors" (85).

Though the narrator's intelligence is implausible, it is not so outlandish that the novel's credibility dissolves. After all, we are dealing with fiction, and certain liberties will be taken by the author and must be

allowed by the reader. That being said, I feel that the novelist's insistence on extremely convoluted and unusual character names harm the integrity of the text. Names such as Artemis, Apollo, Athena, Rinzai, Soto, Quill, Rook, Chisolm, Iris, and Myles were not only a mouthful difficult for the reader to swallow, but a confusing web that ensnared even the author at times. There are several instances (on pages 128 and 130, for instance) where the use of pronouns is not consistent, so that a 'he' and a 'she' refer to the same character within the same paragraph. This detail may seem a tad nitpicky, but I truly believe that it is the neglect of subtle details like these that breaks the spell of fiction and reminds the reader that he or she is reading. And given that one of the novel's more prominent themes is questioning the nature of fiction and its relationship with reality, Curran's powerful meditations are lessened by the inconsistencies of the text. This is not to mention the typos that add up to slightly more than should be permitted for a manuscript of this length.

In spite of these shortcomings, Curran's soulful meditations make *Blood Fable* a worthwhile read. The story shifts between the intertwining tales of the tough real world of the boy narrator, wherein his mother has been diagnosed with cancer about the same time that the Buddhist community has realized that their leader was having relations with an underage girl, and the Verne-inspired fable the boy concocts as a means of escape. The boy's escapism provides Curran with the context to ask and attempt to answer powerful questions, such as: "Was my story just an elaborate metaphor for our current circumstances?" (71). Is all fiction thus?

And later, as his father presses the boy about his creative process, the narrator

asks: “Was I or was I not making up this story?” (138). Does anyone “make up” any story?

Curran’s novel is insightful, if at times over-reaching. There are pearls to be dug from the muck, and most are shining meditations on the nature and purpose of art. The novel wraps up with one such pearl, as the narrator ponders Aristotle’s assertion that art is a mirror held up to nature. All in all, *Blood Fable* questions the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between the timeless and temporal. It is a worthwhile read for any interested in reflecting upon these binaries.

MICHAEL OCCHIONERO was born in Montreal and is the author of *Idle Hands* (2017). He received a BA in English Literature from Concordia University in 2015 and is currently completing an MA in English Literature at Queen’s University.