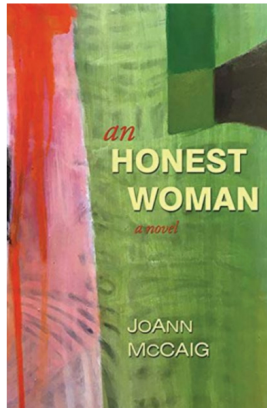




BOOK REVIEWS

An Honest Woman

BY JANNIE EDWARDS JANUARY 1, 2020



by Joann McCaig
ThistleDown Press
2019/\$20.00/304 pp.

AAA

Calgary writer JoAnn McCaig’s latest novel, *An Honest Woman*, has a matryoshka doll structure: It layers the story of a single, middle-aged woman who is writing a novel about a single, middle-aged woman who is writing a novel about a single, middle-aged woman who has an affair with a famous British novelist. If you were confused reading that sentence, I’m not surprised. The book’s flyleaf announces that you hold in your hands “a very bookish novel.” This extends both a promise and a caveat to the reader.

As with other postmodern metafictional novels, McCaig’s stories within stories expose their making, and in doing so trouble the complex relationship between fiction and reality. There is much pleasure to be had in this kind of reading-as-decoding. However, those who resist authorial intrusions and who read with what Coleridge called “the willing suspension of disbelief”—the implicit contract readers make to suspend their critical faculties and read for enjoyment—may balk.

McCaig plays with what novelist John Fowles called the godgame—the creation by novelists of fictional worlds and characters over whom they hold the power of life and death. For example, writer-protagonist Janet Mair imagines she will have to kill someone in order to engineer a meeting between a famous British writer and her protagonist, Jay McNair, who lives in Calgary. (All protagonists have bios and names or initials close to McCaig’s, which plays with what is biographical and what is made up.) Should the famous novelist’s wife “bump herself off”—like Rochester’s mad wife in *Jane Eyre*? Or would killing off his teenage daughter be more sympathetic?

McCaig’s boomer protagonists are perimenopausal, and her dramatization of the complexities of this liminal stage of life are vivid: “One final blast of estrogen” in mid-life smoulders into inflamed writing about sex—not easy to do well. Early on we are introduced to Jay McNair grappling with how to dramatize the power dynamics of a sex scene between a man grieving the suicide of his daughter and his lover. The encounter



scene between a man grieving the suicide of his daughter and his lover. The encounter starts with violent bondage and, remarkably, ends with tenderness.

McCaig's prose often sings: "All around her in the lineup, people are shouting into each other's faces with a noisy social hunger which makes the word *carnivorous* swim into her brain." She has fun with the friction between British classism and prairie down-to-earthiness, as when the Calgary writer tells her British lover: "Screw you, ponce," and "No shit, Sherlock." The interactions between mothers and sons are well written, as are encounters between a college teacher and her students. One might get lost, but there is much to enjoy here.

—*Jannie Edwards is a poet, teacher and editor in Edmonton.*



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