

## A Catalogue of Small Pains

**Meghan L. Dowling**

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“Remembering is the lie of a thread pulled through time backwards,” yet Meghan L. Dowling’s protagonist, Catherine, is determined to reveal the multigenerational legacy of enmity between sisters in her New England family. Over the span of a century, these women have clubbed together and clubbed each other’s hearts with a brutality particular to siblings. A novel that reads like a prose poem, *A Catalogue of Small Pains* traces their story with such convincing humanity that its fictions could be mistaken for documentary truth.

In a novel that could easily venerate nostalgia, Catherine is suspicious of all memories. Memory’s skips, jumps, and reconstructions are captured through equal parts intervention and omission. Beginning with her own relationship to her older sister, she dismantles each generation’s stories, skipping through time, various perspectives, photographs, and other evidence to overturn accepted family mythologies and long-held silences alike.

Dowling constructs a historicity for these characters using narratives, photos, and excerpts of various outside documents, from religious tracts to educational pamphlets to movies. A photograph’s caption notes, “What is left unseen is left to the imagination,” and there’s a constant tension between the implications of a documented, “actual” past and the novel’s revelation of an imagined past’s emotional textures and weight.

As layers of family dysfunction are peeled back, it becomes clear these women exist in a sphere of hovering, unacknowledged, gendered violence, the looming shape of which alters them. Their “catalogue of small pains” has been sublimated and normalized because of their sex.

Beginning with its very title, Dowling’s novel undersells and, thus, perfectly captures the odious, everyday nature of its women’s trials and their attending violations. *A Catalogue of Small Pains* is a small, common story, and that’s the trouble of it all.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (January/February 2019)

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