



A Pontiac in the Woods

Fred Misurella

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(306pp)

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A Pontiac in the Woods is a provocative coming-of-age novel about the material and emotional issues associated with childhood homelessness.

In Fred Misurella's heartfelt novel *A Pontiac in the Woods*, an unconventional young woman experiences an unusual kind of homelessness.

After Jamie's biological parents abandon her and her adoptive parents pass away, she tries out several foster homes before deciding that she's better off on her own. Jamie convinces her social worker and the local police to let her live in a broken-down car in the middle of a wooded area. Her dilapidated Pontiac may not be most people's idea of home-sweet-home, but it provides her with the solitude that she craves. Though facing the dangers of the wild and weather, bullies at school, and her own trauma, Jamie pieces together some normalcy.

That Jamie doesn't want to owe anyone anything, or to be a burden in any way, influences her choices, including around literal and metaphorical running. She finds solace by joining the school's track team, even though, as the only girl on the team, she is not treated well. Dancing is an additional outlet in a story wherein physical exertion is equated with therapeutic escapism and internal quiet.

Jamie narrates, and her inner monologue is self-aware. It's also filled with dark humor, which she cultivates. Jamie proves to be headstrong and, in many ways, seems older than her peers, in part thanks to the sudden upheavals of her childhood. However, her past is described with pain, anger, and resentment, and she finds friendships and relationships difficult to maintain. Throughout the story, she processes her abandonment issues and the losses of her parents, all while working to form crucial bonds with people in her town—like wholesome Mr. Santa, her social worker with whom she briefly lives and who helps to model a positive future for her; and Misha, her reserved and respectful best friend.

Jamie's self-sabotaging tendencies are heightened as she becomes closer to Misha, with whom she forms a tenuous romance, too. Misha's personality complements Jamie's; he is calm when she is flustered, quiet when she is loud, and holds space for her when she thinks herself unworthy of other people's attention. But not everyone in town is as good to Jamie. She is intimidated, antagonized, and isolated. She is subjected to statutory rape; troublingly, blame for it is placed on her, too. While based in truth, this treatment of sexual abuse is triggering.

Though most of the novel proceeds in chronological order, Jamie's abusive relationship is one of several pieces that is shared out of order, and the overall timeline is muddled as a result. The book's conclusion rushes to resolve story lines; within it, some connections fizzle out, and others are inconclusive.

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DELIA STANLEY (August 19, 2020)

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