

## ★ **Bad Mothers, Bad Daughters**

### **Maya Sonenberg**

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Several of the stories in Maya Sonenberg's collection *Bad Mothers, Bad Daughters* are fairy tales. Although populated with kings and princesses and dragons and giants, these fairy tales also contain a dash of the modern. There's a sorceress who dreams of Nordstrom's, a Cinderella-like girl who makes gluten-free cakes, a girl who steals a giant's magic boots and likes Chinese takeout. But even the more realistic stories in the collection retain this sense of the fantastical. Both unique and archetypal, the women embody all-too-human travails: they are mothers and they are daughters; they are not really bad, just human.

Sonenberg subverts the expected rhythm of short stories. Instead of focusing on plot, she focuses on meaning, with infallibly chosen details that reach past the brain and into the soul. The stories are like frames chosen from a movie to evoke radically distilled emotions, rich with symbolism. Still, they remain grounded in place and time. They highlight three girls' coming-of-age summer in a Maine cottage; a mother's guilt over loving one child more than the others; and a doomed amusement park in Seattle.

Many paragraphs could be extracted as prose poems. Sonenberg's writing is lyrical, observing features like "the wading pool, that great cat eye, that circle half reflecting the blue summer sky and half-lidded with tree shadow." The natural world is as much a character as the humans who populate it. The stories address the impact of climate change and delineate human losses with heartbreaking beauty. Describing sea dragons, Sonenberg writes: "They came and dried, a skeleton of lace, a napkin of knits, a wedding veil of skin and now stone."

The short stories of *Bad Mothers, Bad Daughters* are written with such beauty and empathy that each conjures a heartfelt sigh.

KAREN MULVAHILL (July / August 2022)

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