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Cloud Cuckoo Land

Lisa Borders
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Moments after she discovers her grandmother dead in the house they share, four-

teen-year-old Miri Ortiz begs an adult male friend to take her in. She pitches him on marriage. When he declines, she makes another proposal: “Ã‘Then you could adopt me!’ At this point I didn’t care what he was to me, so long as I could live with him. I knew what a bad fix I was in.”

When the man gently points out that the community would disapprove, Miri tries again: “Ã‘Then we could move,’ I said my words fast and desperate. Ã‘We could move to Nashville. I’ll become a famous country singer, and you can be my manager.’”

This audacious grasping for self-preservation, even as her beloved grandmother’s body lies still warm in the next room, foreshadows how Miri will get by on the treacherous road to young adulthood that forms the plot of this ultimately hopeful novel.

Told in an engaging first person voice, the story begins in Prairie Rose, Texas, where Miri’s mother has dumped her at the age of eleven to be raised by her grandmother. The action moves to Philadelphia, as Miri lives on the streets until her stunning singing voice leads her, inadvertently, to the starting line of a real life.

Music infuses this novelÃ’from the Easter pageant where young Miri shines, to the world of 1980s indie rock bands. This is a book only a music lover could write.

For readers, love of music is optional. Miri is the draw.

At once innocent and cunning, living by a moral code forged by instinct, heart, and pragmatism, she evokes other young protagonists, from Huck Finn to Holden Caulfied to Bone in Russell Banks’ Rule of the Bone.

Miri Ortiz, though, is an original. This is not a story of rebellion, but of survival. As a pretty teen-age girl on her own, she figures out quickly that sexual desirability is her one reliable resource. She trades sex for shelter and affection as casually as a bus rider spends a token to get home. Instead of seeing herself as a victim, she relishes the powerÃ’however brief and fragileÃ’her seductiveness gives her.

Though Miri ends up repeating many of her mother’s mistakes, the author treats this theme deftly enough that readers won’t feel bludgeoned by pop psychology.

Borders, who lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, teaches writing and has had her short fiction widely published in literary magazines. Cloud Cuckoo Land found its way into print by winning River City Publishing’s 2001 Fred Bonnie Memorial Award for Best First Novel, in a competition judged by Pat Conroy and his wife, writer Sandra Conroy. The honor is also a win for readers, whose prize is an introduction to the work of this talented writer.
KAREN HOLT (November / December 2002)

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