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## Cracks

**Sheila Kohler**
Zoland Books (September 2000)
Unknown $21.00 (176pp)
978-1-58195-008-3

It's like Southern Comfort. It sneaks up on you. Like that first sip of the slow-to-kick-in drink, Cracks begins innocently enough as a sweet-tasting story of sisterhood in a boarding school in South Africa. The kind of school with a close clan of girls who worship a favorite teacher (Miss G, their swim coach) and mutually despise the outsider girl (Fiamma, an Italian princess who doesn't seem interested in fitting in).

The girls adore Miss G. She's young and rebellious. She urges them to seek truth. "Miss G was our crack. When you had a crack you saw things more clearly: the thick dark of the shadows and the transparence of the oak leaves in the light and the soft glow of the pink magnolia petals against their waxy leaves."

They would do anything to be with her. They learn to faint in chapel so she will take them outside and just sit quietly next to her.

The sweetness starts to fade as it becomes apparent that Miss G is infatuated with Fiamma. As her attraction grows to obsession, the novel burrows deeper than the superficial bonds these schoolgirls share to reveal the underlying layers of primitive cultism and carnal violence in their world that erupt with the disappearance of Fiamma.

The novel is written in first person from the viewpoint of an anonymous character, which gives the reader a feeling of being let in on their secrets. The author, however, also includes herself as one of the characters, written about in the third person: "No one says anything, but we all look at Sheila and remember how she used to make up long stories in the dark of the dormitory." Since people don't normally speak about themselves in the third person, this can be a little distracting in the beginning. Once this slight discomfort is overcome, however, the end result is the vague notion planted in the reader's psyche that, just maybe, this really could have happened.

Kohler succeeds in taking the innocence lost theme that these days-of-adolescence plots often portray to new twisted dimensions in Cracks. It is a novel for adult readers that will be enjoyed by those interested in the darker side of human nature and the shocking acts that are possible. The source behind Fiamma's disappearance is an unsettling surprise, and, like that first Southern Comfort experience, once you live through the kick at the end, you never look at the whole of the experience the same way again.
(August 16, 1999)

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