FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Feather Man
Rhyll McMaster
Marion Boyars Publishers
978-0-7145-3148-9
(August 31, 2008)

Sooky is only six years old when her family moves next door to an older man named Lionel. As her parents' marriage falls apart, Sooky spends more time with Lionel, helping him tend his chickens. She basks in the adult attention, getting virtually none at home, until Lionel sexually abuses her. Under Lionel's spell, she reluctantly returns, but by the time she is a teenager, he has lost interest, and Sooky's father, whom she adores but who treats her with cruel insensitivity, has left her nagging, unhappy mother.

Art is the one thing that saves Sooky. Though her traumatic and cold childhood fails to meet her basic emotional needs, she discovers she can draw. As she gets older, she starts to paint, and comes to be recognized for her original talent. Such appreciation would seem a happy ending for Sooky, but alas, the early trauma results in unnatural sexual fascinations.

Sooky is preternaturally self-aware; she describes her estrangement from herself and the world in poignant detail. Her early story is told in the first person, present-tense of her child self; but Sooky is able to describe what Lionel has stolen from her from an adult perspective. This part of the book, which takes up the first third, is the most painful, riveting, and compelling.

Feather Man, Australian poet Rhyll McMaster's first novel, is sometimes distressing, but Sooky's unflinching eye and sense of humor imbue the book with complexity and vitality. It's clear that McMaster is a poet; her writing is filled with lyrical language that brings dusty Brisbane, Australia, where Sooky grows up, and gritty London, where she moves as an adult, equally to life. Sooky's voice stands out as original and insightful and truly drives the book. McMaster has shown that she can create two types of literature, which is a welcome development indeed.

Nancy H Fontaine