



## If Clara

**Martha Baillie**

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*If Clara is moving and wiry, and full of poetic coincidences.*

A story of artistic accomplishment and mental struggles, *If Clara* comes through four narrators who are connected to the enigmatic title character.

Creative, troubled, and unpredictable Clara has written a novel. At first it is presented as inspired by a book of Syrian folktales left splayed in the library photocopier, and by her psychiatrist's urging to write something less experimental, more consecutive.

The novel she writes, and whether a writer she admires might help her publish it pseudonymously, opens up questions of who can write what. Yet the premise behind who wrote the book changes as *If Clara* goes on. What the audience thinks it knows is subject to constant shifting, and characters are pulled tighter together by breathtakingly poetic coincidences.

Passages of folktales taken from Clara's novel—the book within the book—reveal her sense of the world's harshness, especially where girls and women are concerned. Her meetings with Daisy, the injured writer who might help publish the book, are remarkably tentative interactions. Clara may flee the scene, or slam her door, at any moment.

Switching to other characters' viewpoints adds tension when Clara seems in danger, and the other characters offer some surprises of their own. Multiple metaphorical and literal crash landings also factor in.

Daisy's early scenes focus on her whole-leg injury and the monotonous physical therapy she creeps through to gain any mobility at all. She is putting up with the lack of privacy that comes from helpful friends, and moving her leg one inch at a time, when Clara leaves a manuscript on her doorstep. They seem to inch toward each other. Progress on both fronts is slow and happens mostly indoors, until two final vigorous scenes get all the characters outdoors.

A short and moving novel, *If Clara* is poetic and wiry, focusing on its intriguing characters' interactions with each other and on the unusual, wonderful thematic connections of flight and falling.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (September/October 2017)

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