

Moving Pieces

Emily Maroutian

Maroutian Entertainment

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Author Emily Maroutian reveals little about the protagonist in *Moving Pieces*. The character's gender remains nebulous, although context often leans toward the masculine. The nameless figure is a software developer, who has a passion for music and a yet unexplored interest in writing. His defining characteristic is that he's mired in the depression and ennui of a quarter-life crisis.

So he enlists a friend to embark on a road trip through California in the hopes that new surroundings and new people will jolt him out of his stupor. His friend John steers their journey into the Bay Area to hear a friend's band play a show in Oakland. Instead of moving on, he and John stay in the San Francisco area, mixing with a crew of punk rockers who drink all night and bohemian misfits who perform spoken word at impromptu parties.

Through his new acquaintances, the protagonist meets Anari, a brash singer in a punk band and the object of every guy's infatuation. As Maroutian writes, she's "coolness redefined," and her magnetic spirit awakens something in the novel's depressed main character. But he questions whether or not he should push their flirty friendship to the next level, since Anari has her own baggage.

Because Maroutian provides little description of the two travelers' stopovers—in places such as Santa Barbara, San Jose, or San Francisco—the story unfolds like the hazy recollection of a heavy drinker. The only anchoring details are about music, from the soundtrack playing on the car radio to the live shows to extended conversations about bands. For readers who share the characters' musical tastes, from the Velvet Underground to the Donnas, it's an interesting way to center an otherwise amorphous narrative.

Although Maroutian's characters are intriguing and her dialogue is well-paced and natural, her story's ratio of exposition to action is frustrating for the reader. For example, as the book opens, her protagonist takes several pages to mull through his depression before the author finally places the reader in a particular scene, which is inside a car at the start of a road trip.

In another problematic instance, Maroutian reverts to summary when she could have employed dialogue: "For the next hour, we argued about the relevance of '60s bands in today's music and whether today's music could even be considered music. I was annoyed at everything he had to say."

The author's decision not to indicate the protagonist's sex is an interesting exercise in preconceived notions of gender and relationships. But her execution of the subject, with many clues that he is indeed a he, makes the story feel incomplete and confused. Maroutian's novel, her second, is aptly titled: It's a worthwhile collection of moving pieces.

AMANDA MCCORQUODALE (July 22, 2011)

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