

Literary

Nothing

Anne Marie Wirth Cauchon

Two Dollar Radio

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Stumbling through the smothering haze of smoke, both figuratively and literally, the characters in this novel search for wholeness and clarity.

Through the acrid haze of wildfires torching the American West, a young man's search for clues to the disappearance of the father he never knew comes full circle amidst the flames.

Anne Marie Wirth Cauchon's first novel, for which she received a MacDowell Fellowship in 2010, gives a sensitive and deeply disturbing look at two of America's disaffected populations—young people, their minds clouded by drink and drugs, trapped without hope in endless cycles of repetitive behaviors; and homeless wanderers living on the streets, some predators and others prey—all waiting and watching as the devouring fires draw closer.

Guided by a few old photographs and hints that the man he seeks, who might have fathered another child, most likely has been murdered, James steals money and a prized pistol from his stepfather. Hopping trains and hitching rides from Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Missoula, Montana, he encounters Ruth and Bridget, ensnared in a codependent relationship in which Bridget is everything and Ruth, nothing. At one point, Ruth says, "I was nothing in the first place, which is what started this whole mess." Indeed, each of the characters is gapingly incomplete and trying to find completion in someone else; when this proves impossible, as it always does, booze, parties, and drugs temporarily dull the pain.

The lung-searing smoke of the wildfires is more than a backdrop as the author takes it almost to the stature of a main character—a relentless, scorching cloud that affects everything it touches, leaving people devil-eyed as they cough and wonder when the call to evacuate might come. Cauchon skillfully reveals how behind it all, at least for James, lies the struggle to make sense of a world in which incessant warfare and torture can exist side by side with "zombie(s) in Louis Vuitton."

Cauchon's dialogue, marked by fragmentary, stumbling sentences, perfectly expresses the confusion and inner turmoil that keeps her characters from making the decisions that could change their lives for the better. Filled with foreboding from the start, *Nothing* is like a nightmare in which you know you should run, but can't. Some may not like Cauchon's generally unsympathetic characters, but her luminous writing makes them linger in the mind, just as the smell of smoke lingers long after a fire is extinguished.

Kristine Morris