FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

Once Upon a River
Bonnie Jo Campbell
W. W. Norton and Company
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"The Stark River flowed around the oxbow at Murrayville the way blood flowed through Margo Crane's heart." These lines begin Bonnie Jo Campbell's stunning new novel, *Once Upon a River*, a story whose seemingly simple rhythm is as fluid and varied as a current. Set in rural Michigan, the book is at times tumultuous and at other times serene, and the narrative's tempo embodies Margo's trip on the river—her endeavor to find a true home after years of being pitched and tossed on life's rapids.

Once Upon a River is Campbell's fourth book of fiction. Her work is gritty and dogged in its honesty, but it also carries a tenderness and vulnerability, rendering Campbell's characters almost unbearably human. Margo Crane is no different. She learns to shoot after the death of her grandfather, and the narrator says, "The kick of the [shotgun] knocked her back. After that, she jammed it tightly into her shoulder and absorbed the recoil with her whole body. She loaded and shot until she knew she would be bruised." Her urge to fire a gun grows stronger as each new tragedy unfolds. To Margo, shooting becomes a matter of survival, both physical and emotional—especially after she flees from home.

Margo's river journey pulls her into others' lives, but she never shakes the sense that she must fend for herself. The narrator says Margo "… walked to the river's edge, and made her way back around the fence on shivering legs, exhausted from freezing and thawing, exhausted from a whole life of holding herself up." As she becomes increasingly isolated, she begins to look upon the river with a new kind of eye: "There was always something hungry in the river." There's a hunger inside Margo as well, a craving for love and for safety, but also for finding a way of life that gives her what she needs.

This is a novel of grief and coping, of survival and growing up, and of learning to accept the past without allowing it to consume the present. When discussing his protagonist's new life, the narrator says, "Maybe Margo was giving up too much to live out here on a boat … But for

now she knew she would be giving up more if she tried to live any other way.” Margo’s expedition teaches her to swim with the waves, to remember that, although the river is always moving—always changing—the shore may not be too far after all.

Jessica Henkle