

## Out of Peel Tree

**Laura Long**

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*Striking imagery imbues the ordinary with meaning—every vivid word serves a purpose.*

With layers of symbolism and poetic lyricism, Laura Long's carefully crafted *Out of Peel Tree* begs to be slowly absorbed, read and reread, as it weaves together the defining moments in the lives of a West Virginian family. As the various stories pull together, Long's characters overcome and appreciate the impact of the past as they search, hope, and work toward their futures.

Broken into three thematic sections with multiple stories in each section, Long's narrative is nonlinear, jumping from character to character, changing points of view, and moving forward and backward in time. Some characters, like Corina and Billie, are featured in multiple stories.

Although some may prefer a more direct style, these shifts don't feel jarring or unnatural. Instead, common themes tie the stories together. Every character reconciles the person they were and are with the one they, sometimes unconsciously, wish to become. They are haunted and sometimes driven by the past as they seek a sense of home, belonging, and self. The characters' interconnectedness, both familial and thematic, help create cohesiveness.

A published poet, Long is sensitive to the details of life and people. Her themes, characterizations, and story are built on a foundation of symbolism and imagery. She transforms the everyday—butter clogging bread, the shaking of cornflakes, an African violet plant, wrinkles—into meaning.

At the same time, Long also uses poetic, often poignant imagery to make the ordinary vivid. An herb garden that happens to connect a baker's realm in the kitchen to her husband's workshop in the garage blooms into a "green fire, tangled flumes fattening in the light of summer." A critical mother disturbs the morning quiet with "the rasp of her slippers down the stairs." Mice "are the hunger in [Corina's] brain and stomach," while their teeth, "tiny chisels, tick at [her] bones."

This kind of layered writing creates the feeling that every word is important. Meaning reveals itself bit by bit, and the book invites a slower reading. At the same time, dialogue, a vested interest in the characters, and the intriguing, emotionally charged turning points in the characters' lives keep the stories balanced.

A reader who really enjoys symbolism, both subtle and obvious, would get the most enjoyment from the book, but the plot, characters, and atypical structure offer something for most readers.

ALICIA SONDHAI (Spring 2014)

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