

Paradise Earth

Amy Barker

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Paradise Earth is a provocative literary novel that highlights the complex relationship between violence and compassion.

In Amy Barker's existential novel *Paradise Earth*, a trio faces demons on a Tasmanian peninsula that's known for its brutal past, as well as for its paradisiacal allure.

As the anniversary of the 1996 shooting in Port Arthur nears, the date coincides with other festivities that attract tourists to the region. Ruth, who grew up on the Tasmania peninsula, guides her artist partner, Seamus, to rock formations that he wins a grant to paint. While Ruth and Seamus prepare their canvasses, John, Ruth's brother, prepares his son, Rusty, for his first duck hunt with his own gun. Marina, with her brother Moon, is back to scatter her mother's ashes—and to protest the annual duck hunt in her honor. The looming anniversary charges the present with a current of change.

Ruth, John, and Marina's perspectives are just one entry point to the book's rich, layered plot. Their biting, argumentative exchanges with others (Ruth and John at odds over guns; Marina and John on opposite sides of the duck hunt; and Ruth and Marina have differing views on love) reflect their inner turmoils. Dreams and stream-of-consciousness segments show the past's haunting effects on their present conflicts.

Myths and legends also thicken the narrative, whose characters contend with their own ghosts in the context of Tasmania's history as a prison camp and wild frontier. The constant threat of the setting's storms, turbulent waters, and rough terrain comes across in multiple drownings, disappearances, and rescues that foreshadow a final cataclysm that the characters face together.

The chapters assume a ruminating pace. Their descriptions focus on characters' tangled thoughts as much as on the many menial tasks they perform, including gun cleaning, food preparation, errands, and hiking. Ruth withholds her painful connection to the shootings from Seamus. In the face of his artistic distance, she expresses her true feelings in her feral affection for him, and in her resentment toward John. John's inner diatribes target his enemies, including the feminine influences whom he thinks turn Rusty soft, instead of into a hardened man. A wolf devouring chickens on Marina's mother's property is the least of her worries; she contends with it while her mother's activist legacy fights inside of her. A perseverative tone builds suspense toward the more active sequences at the book's conclusion.

Rusty, the youngest character, exposes the future's fragility in the face of the personal and cultural pressures that the book explores. With his interest in video games over farm implements, and books over guns, coupled with his admiration for his girlfriend's eco-loving values, Rusty prompts his dad's anger and triggers a series of events that change the course of the novel. A climactic tragedy becomes an opportunity to right the traumas of the Port Arthur shooting.

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MARI CARLSON (February 10, 2021)

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