

Pearl

Siân Hughes

The Indigo Press (Oct 3, 2023)

Softcover \$18.99 (256pp)

978-1-911648-52-9

A girl is consumed with grief and guilt when her mother goes missing in Siân Hughes's luminous novel *Pearl*.

Marianne recalls the exact moment when the police stopped looking for her missing mother and began searching for her body. While she knows her mother is gone, she will not believe she is dead. Words of consolation bring her no comfort. Always including the word "loss," they make her feel responsible, as though she put her mother somewhere and forgot where.

The suggestion that her mother drowned in the river causes Marianne to faint, and the concussion keeps her out of school. Realizing that the appearance of illness can keep her at home, she develops "a fine set of symptoms." She forgets how to read, laugh, and be a child. She becomes strange, someone to be avoided. At fifteen, she forms a friendship with a disturbed college student who reveals another mystery and unearths secrets involving her father.

The narrative is intense in addressing the workings of Marianne's tortured mind, which is filled with thoughts that lead to her isolation, refusal of food, and secret cuttings. Rays of light penetrate the gloom of her haunting existence: Marianne remembers her mother's love and laughter, and later she becomes a mother herself. These momentary reprieves contend with the book's dark mysteries, about which subtle clues are dropped throughout. Marianne encounters a song and contends with the obsessive keeping of a grave and a garden; she learns about links to paganism and finds a buried silver amulet. These factors are embedded into her daily life—almost overlooked until the book's soul-liberating conclusion.

Complex and colored with songs, myths, and legends, *Pearl* is an exquisite novel that transforms darkness into light.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September / October 2023)

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