

The Dark Heart of Every Wild Thing

Joseph Fasano

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Three generations of men haunt the pages of Joseph Fasano's novel about masculinity, fatherhood, and vengeance.

The novel is set in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, where a father brings his nine-year-old son to the woods to track a mountain lion, as his father did before him. In language that's poetic and turgid, the novel moves between the painful past and the desperate present, showing how the man reckons with his father's legacy, and with his understanding of what it means to be a good father and a good man.

When the novel begins, the man's wife has been dead for two years. Fathers lurk in the corners of his story: both he and his wife had troubled relationships with their fathers, and those relationships colored their marriage and their interactions with their little boy. Survival dictates most of the decisions that the man makes in the woods, though tenderness reigns in the careful way he interacts with his child. Then, the unthinkable happens.

As the novel jerks forward, it drops hints about the man's marriage and its difficulties. Tension is created via clipped phrases and bouts of lyricism, as with "when I came into the clearing that looked back into the firs I saw it: open-winged, broad as an anchor, a redtail sinking its head into flashes of fur as it balanced there." These make the stark realities of the cold woods, which are both beautiful and deadly, haunting. In moments, the overarching metaphor feels forced; it is repeated a number of times. But the storytelling that supports it is effective. The man battles a series of essential foes: nature, himself, his past, and fellow people.

The Dark Heart of Every Wild Thing couples poetic observations and rhythmic language with swerving plot twists, resulting in a tense, rich story about survival and change.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (September / October 2020)

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