



The Honey Farm

Harriet Alida Lye

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One April, a notice shows up in publications across Canada: “A free retreat for artists, writers, thinkers! ... Also learn how to keep bees!” Ten artists respond, gathering at a rural, isolated farm. As members of the colony weather changes within and without, idyllic daydreams are accompanied by nightmares. Both disturbing and disturbed, Harriet Alida Lye’s *The Honey Farm* hinges on a terrible disquiet that forms as landscape and lives converge.

Slipping into the fictional dream is easy. Lye’s beautiful prose creates an enveloping sense of place, yet the groundwork isn’t well laid for the story’s devolution into psychodrama. Hive structure and Old Testament plagues offer rubrics for understanding the novel’s complications. Both are compelling and disquieting, yet unresolved vying between schemas disrupts potential insight into characters and the novel’s ending.

Although ten artists live and work on the farm with hostess Cynthia and her farmhand, few characters are explored. Surfaces are mistaken for substance, and early developments don’t hold up to the novel’s later weight. Though their interactions are few, this is especially applicable to the inexplicably intense relationship between Cynthia and aspiring poet Silvia.

Both characters are freighted with backstory that’s never fully addressed. Liminal connections are made between Silvia and Cynthia’s prior partner, a woman who’s bisexual, mentally unstable, and keeping Cynthia from their daughter. Silvia’s childhood religion predisposes her to see the world through Old Testament darkness, and her attempts to relinquish this structure lead to a bewildering madness. Central to the novel’s chain of events, Silvia and Cynthia’s relationship implies a problematic shorthand about female sexuality and mental illness that’s clearly invoked but never unpacked.

In *The Honey Farm*, love and power are inextricably enmeshed. These blurred lines thread everything with threats until nothing seems reliable. Lye reconstitutes the terrain of gothic horror and the strangeness that’s bred from isolation.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May/June 2018)

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