

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart

Holly Ringland

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Holly Ringland's piquant debut, *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart*, is alternately airy and precise. It occupies a space somewhere between a fairy tale and a modern tragedy.

Alice is born by the seaside. She drinks salt air and spends her days among flowers with her cool-eyed, delicate mother, who teaches her the language of blossoms. She dreams about fire, too. According to ancient myths, a conflagration may be the answer to her father's mercurial moods.

Alice wants to make her isolated family's few happy moments last forever; instead, one horrifying night strips everything she knows away. She ends up in the care of her unfamiliar grandmother, a floriographer who lives among a different kind of Flowers—the lost women who gather at Thornfield, the family's farm.

These pages are awash in perfumed images—of petals and the stories they tell; of red desert craters flush and ablaze with flowers and myths. Individually, any paragraph might proffer a synaesthetic wonder; collectively, the novel is a dense, intoxicating scrapbook of affecting notions.

But beyond the beauty of flowers and their meanings (love forsaken; love concealed; fascination, witchcraft) are raw family stories: of abuse, murder, betrayal, and loss. Even as people with uncanny monikers—there's a Moss, a Rivers, and a Stone, not to mention the Harts—drift in and out of her life, Alice looks for something true to hold on to.

Part of the book's magic comes in its refusal to define any event more than necessary. Accounts of heartbreak are decisive, and bruises rise to the text's aching surface, but otherwise, the book could stand anywhere, in any time, and among any people who are hurting, as true.

The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart is a sentimental in the best possible way. This story about family, love, and reinvention is defiant in its sweetness and is stirring to its end.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March/April 2019)

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