

The Strophes of Job

Ted Morrissey

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*A snowstorm plunges small-town families into horrifying situations in *The Strophes of Job*, a novel founded on the visual terror of uncertainty.*

Evoking Greek odes, Ted Morrissey's terrifying and uncanny novel *The Strophes of Job* follows two desperate families through a frozen landscape as creatures of death move in the darkness.

In a rural Midwestern town with one midwife, two women go into labor in the middle of a whiteout snowstorm. As their families attempt to reach the midwife, they move through snow several feet deep. And even beyond the snow, the landscape is treacherous, plagued by wolves or worse—ghosts; memories; a forest in which five people went missing.

Founded on the visual terror of uncertainty and grounded by its handful of imperiled characters, this small-town horror is moved forward by the cast's solitary reflections on the events leading up to their present moments. Exposition wends into their thoughts, drawing attention away from the present terrors to flesh out the wider world. In one scene, a character is disoriented by the totality of the whiteness of the snow combined with the cloud cover; thus, they digress into their memories. At times, these diversions impede the book's momentum, which is otherwise built up by immaculate, visceral descriptions of the freezing world around the families:

The snow was so deep it was getting inside her boots. The icy wind bit at her cheeks and watered her eyes. She didn't mind. It also drowned out Sarah's anguish. Rebecca looked up at her sister's window, which was a dark square with snow sloping on its sill. No one would have guessed what horror was happening beyond the dull-looking glass.

Throughout the novel, hidden forces in the darkness haunt the cast. When coyotes or wolves appear, they are reacted to as if they are evil incarnate. Such uncertainties are pervasive: anything could be more than its outward appearance, and most characters have half-knowledge of the history of their town and their neighbors. Liminality dominates the book's progression.

Perspective shifts heighten the uncertainty: one of the chapters is told from the perspective of a boy whose mother had an affair, which is revealed through the innocent details he picked up on and the small actions he takes. Elsewhere, an undertaker who's also a loner starts to hear whispers from the dead. And the prose is clever and beautiful, flush with vibrant descriptions. It sometimes skirts being overwritten, as when details that were communicated well previously are turned over again; such reexaminations are distracting. Still, because it is so intricate, the narrative remains memorable throughout.

The Strophes of Job is a haunting novel in which imperiled families fight for survival against secrets and a deadly storm.

BEN LINDER (April 24, 2024)

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