

The Worm Man

Mary Frances Hill

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A woman with a traumatic past comes under her neighbors' suspicion when a child is kidnapped in the surprise-filled mystery novel The Worm Man.

In Mary Frances Hill's thrilling small-town mystery novel *The Worm Man*, a girl's disappearance is linked to a widowed elementary school teacher's past.

Ever since she witnessed the abduction of her childhood best friend by the now-deceased Worm Man, Kate has struggled. Now, almost one year after her husband died, she needs money to keep her house and pay off her debts. She begs a local gallery owner to sell her artwork, and the owner agrees—after seeing a grisly, morbid drawing of Kate's in which "a four-fingered hand grips a bloody snowball. Pieces of red yarn and worms poke out of the snow mound." An anonymous buyer purchases her art; Kate takes first place at the exhibition. Her life begins spiraling even more out of control.

When her favorite former student, Cassie, goes missing, Kate becomes convinced that the Worm Man is still alive. She sets out on a mission to save Cassie, find the Worm Man, and clear her own name, as she's become suspect number one. Her investigation is fraught and marked by painful recollections. Still, Kate makes new friends as she unearths unhappy truths about those who she believed were closest to her.

Kate undergoes treatment at a mental hospital to address her childhood traumas. In this way and others, the stigmas attached to mental health struggles become a prevalent theme of the novel. It covers the effects of physical, mental, and emotional bullying; social ostracization; guilt; and the assumptions made about those dealing with ADHD. Such situations are rendered in precise, empathetic terms. Kate's treatment is viewed negatively by her fellow community members, coworkers, and people from her past, coloring their views of her intentions and mental capacities; they see her as no longer reliable and think that she shouldn't be in contact with children.

Vivid imagery is included from beginning to end, painting clear pictures of people, their physical altercations, and the surrounding nature and neighborhood homes: "A crack zigzags across the driveway, a peeling Safe Neighbor House sticker mars the front window, two boxwood shrubs and a maple tree adorn the yard, and a rain gutter spout points toward a path of seashells." People's conversations and thoughts are similarly flowing and easy, featuring resonant instances of cattiness and sarcasm, as well as fearful and malicious threats. Elsewhere, ellipses and long dashes create pauses and add to the drama. There's an apt amount of suspense throughout, too, keeping the questions coming and allowing doubt to hang over many characters. This makes Kate's plight much more difficult: she isn't sure who she can trust or turn to.

With unexpected twists, *The Worm Man* is a mystery novel set in a small town that becomes a petri dish for contemplation.

ALEX DAILEY (October 19, 2022)

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