

Thirteen Shells

Nadia Bozak

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This wise, moving ode to an era turns the pain of growing up with divorce into a hopeful journey.

Thirteen Shells draws an impressionable Canadian girlhood from the late 1970s through the 1980s. Nadia Bozak reveals the erosion of a family's pioneering idealism; the lure of American convenience; heartaches; and the bond between a daughter and her parents. Through choice keepsakes, brilliant shards of memory illustrate a lonely upbringing.

Short stories portray Shell's change from a five-year-old who watches her parents' disintegrating marriage to a high schooler who makes peace with the knowledge that adults, too, are flawed, and that she doesn't have to follow anyone's footsteps. When Shell's family moves to a house on Cashel Street, her parents' belief in subverting the mainstream unravels. Minor differences hint at larger rifts.

Whether noticing her father's love for Leonard Cohen's music and her mother's for Bob Dylan's, or her father's view of fiddlehead ferns as a culinary delicacy and her own view of them as evidence of poverty, Shell's observations are astute reminders that nothing gets past a child. Her ability to read silences, expressions, and signs reveal the self-aware intelligence of one who has spent a lifetime taking the measure of everyone around her.

The author excels at tracing Shell's loss of innocence through sharp images. A koi pond, given as a gift, freezes and must be broken with an ax to save the fish. A tire swing, which serves as a refuge, unravels. A fleeting, early encounter comes back in a devastating form. Shell's keen perceptions elevate common experiences, imbuing them with emotion.

Especially fine stories include "Left Luggage," which details Shell's road trip to Florida with her mother, before Christmas. The simple premise highlights the weariness of both characters and their effort to make the best of each other's company. "She Will Make Music Wherever She Goes" features a wedding party that leaves Shell humiliated, but also aware of the widening distance between her past and present. "Hole in the Wall" depicts Shell's visit to her father, and the loyalty that prompts her to keep her secrets about the trip.

Thirteen Shells digs up salient facets of adolescence. This wise, moving ode to an era turns the pain of growing up with divorce into a hopeful journey.

KAREN RIGBY (March/April 2017)

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