

This Earth You'll Come Back To

Barbara Roether

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This Earth You'll Come Back To, by Barbara Roether, is a singular, profoundly moving debut novel narrated by Rose Healy Koehner, a Midwestern wife and mother of ten who recounts her life and times to her daughter Stephanie. There is a unique twist to Rose's tale telling: she does it from the grave while Stephanie stands at her graveside. Rest assured, though, there's nothing supernatural or ghoulish about Roether's narrative. It is an elegant rumination on memory, family, contrition, connectedness, and the ways in which geography and landscape—indeed, the place we call home—informs our self-perception.

The novel opens with Rose chastising Stephanie for roaming around the cemetery looking for Rose's headstone in the heat of a hot July afternoon in Blanchardville, Ohio. Bitter and disapproving, Rose does not make a good first impression on readers. Then her tone shifts. She philosophizes about love. She addresses Stephanie as "dear daughter." She tells her that she was the easiest of her children to love. And she begins her chronology, recollecting the histories of her Irish and German relatives and their journeys to America, her difficult marriage to an alcoholic, her imperfect mothering, her childhood, and her understanding of Stephanie's innate need to pursue being far from home, wandering somewhere, always elsewhere.

Structured thematically by chapter titles such as "Origins," "Marriage," "Maladies," and "Departures," Rose's memory talk revolves around those subjects, yet the progression of her storytelling never feels confined by them. Rose is the consummate raconteur; she expresses one compelling insight after another and can state the obvious and the sublime with ease. Well-read and perceptive, Rose references literature and characters from novels to emphasize her point. And as a mother of ten, her wisdom about children and motherhood is indelible.

There's no action in Roether's novel; there's only Rose's voice. Roether uses foreshadowing and a colloquial stream-of-consciousness writing style to pull readers into Rose's melancholic and confessional recitations. Roether has crafted a haunting, complete, and triumphant novel from one character's perspective. It is a stellar and distinctive achievement.

AMY O'LOUGHLIN (Winter 2016)

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