ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

What You See in the Dark
Manuel Munoz
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When Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho was first released in 1960, audiences were treated to many on-screen firsts: a flushing toilet, an image of unmarried lovers sharing a bed, a depiction of murder in a shower, and Janet Leigh as the first woman ever to be revealed wearing a bra on film!

Some audience members reacted with horror even before the classic stabbing scene. Manuel Munoz's fictional protagonist, Arlene Watson, for one, walks out of the theatre while at the same time detesting the thought of the younger audience members watching her disgusted reaction. She might have other reasons for her high level of emotion, though. Along with the usual weight of disappointments that typically plague middle-aged women left by their husbands in small California towns, her only son, Dan, recently fled after allegedly murdering his girlfriend.

Arlene isn't the only one exhausted with life. A shoe store clerk, Candy, watches the love affair develop between Dan and her co-worker Teresa and seethes with jealousy and resentment. Teresa herself, before meeting Dan, aches with the loss of her mother and dares to harbor dreams of being a singer on a stage.

Manuel Munoz writes with a wistful tenderness, using a clever mix of narrators to explore the heartache, resignation, and even violent tragedy that can follow the path of love. Recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and the Whiting Writer's Award, Munoz displays a touch that's both rich and reticent while weaving a cast of narrators that couldn't be more different from each other. From a poor, lonely nineteen-year-old girl to Alfred Hitchcock having breakfast in Cannes, Munoz's characters remain steadfast to their individual natures.

Bakersfield, the town in which the drama unfolds, is a character unto itself. Munoz deftly brings details of the town to the surface, paralleled by the characters' various trials of endurance. For example, the large plate-glass windows in the café, one of the few that survived the earthquake of 1952, morph from acting as a frame for the young lovers into yet another source of exposure for Arlene, who fears the judgment of the townspeople after her son disappears.

What You See in the Dark offers a perfectly calibrated glimpse into the interwoven lives of the luckless, the lovelorn, and the revolutionary as they all teeter on the brink of social upheaval in the 1960s.

Andi Diehn