ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

Who by Fire
Mary L. Tabor
Outer Banks
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Mary Tabor's *Who By Fire*, about a man reckoning with his wife's death, serves up language so precise and assured that it leaves a reader breathless with its quiet force. There are no loose ends in this intricate story by an accomplished writing instructor, and the musicality of Tabor's prose, precise as a metronome in its insistence on symbolism, propels us effortlessly through the first quarter of the book. On the one hand, it's a remarkable sensation to enter so easily into the lives of her smart characters; but, over time, the same feeling renders the reader claustrophobic, and it becomes clear that the possessive quality of the narrator's carefully constructed world is not only his downfall, but potentially a flaw of the book, as well.

It's easy to see why Robert, a financial administrator, fell for Lena, who is, as her name suggests, swanlike in her physical and mental delicacy, and flighty. A restorer of artifacts for a museum on The Mall, in Washington, DC, she often spoke in code by quoting ancient and classical texts. For four years, she also cheated on Robert with a colleague, Isaac, who provides forensic analysis of bones for a living. This betrayal only becomes apparent to Robert when he watches Isaac brush the hair from Lena's forehead as she lays dying. It's an old story: Isaac's vitality and sensuality bound Lena to him; by contrast, she compared Robert to an old Plymouth, "nice and reliable"; Tabor likens Lena to a china teacup, the luster of which, it can be surmised, caused Robert to never take her full measure.

Robert's double loss leaves him searching for answers and takes the form of a litany of his deficiencies, as well as those of Lena and Isaac. "If only" is the unspoken wish behind these musings, which are effectively related in flashback. In a powerful passage at the book's beginning, Robert reminisces about watching a controlled fire take down a grain bin in his Iowa hometown shortly after Lena dies. There, he experienced what he describes as "a direct hit," one of those rare occurrences that doesn't need to be filtered by the brain to be keenly felt. Robert believes that Lena alone would have understood how much he values this experience, and would perhaps have even loved him better for it.

As it turns out, Lena withheld from Robert more than her affair. Before her marriage she

was impregnated by Isaac and aborted the fetus, but “confessed” to Robert upon his proposal that she was barren. This revelation parallels a contemporary newspaper story about a dead infant’s remains that are found in a suitcase, a mystery Isaac attends to at work and about which Lena obssesses.

If Tabor’s intent in this novel was to simulate the suffocation that Lena obviously felt with Robert, she succeeds. Regardless, one wants to throw open a window onto the prose and allow it to circulate beyond the page, and occasionally even be carried away by the wind in the same way that our random thoughts often lead nowhere. Just as the fire that stoked Robert’s imagination required oxygen, this very good novel might burn even brighter if it only let in a little air.

Julie Eakin