

Belle Boggs's *Mattaponi Queen*

Character and place are tightly interwoven in Belle Boggs's linked collection, *Mattaponi Queen*, winner of the 2009 Katherine Bakeless Nason Prize. From the oppressive heat of King William County, Virginia to the stagnant smell of the Mattaponi River, the setting for these confidently narrated stories is as integral as character. In "Good News for a Hard Time," Ronnie, who is two months pregnant, visits her dad, Bruce, on the Mattaponi Indian Reservation, and prepares to face her husband, who lost part of his arm in Iraq. Ronnie might

have turned to her mother in better days for comfort, but she ran off years prior. We learn all this by the second page of the story. The strength of this story, and the ones that follow, is not only its narration, but how it is crafted. Boggs begins many paragraphs in media res and concludes them with lines that reveal depth and complexity. A paragraph in which Ronnie thinks back on her decision to drop out of art school ends with these lines: "Bruce hadn't tried to talk her out of it, though she'd wished he would; he tended to believe what was most convenient at the time." Boggs's sentences make the tension between characters palpable.

In this novel-in-stories, characters reappear throughout the book and offer insight into the present story and the ones preceding it. For instance, we first meet Skinny, Bruce's best friend, in "Good News for a Hard Time." Later, in "It Won't Be Long," we learn that Skinny had been an alcoholic and painkiller addict and now his hepatitis C has worsened and he must get his affairs in order. Boggs showcases his interior life through his surroundings. "He held the small pile nervously in his hands as he waited on the community pier for Ronnie. The day was warm and overcast, muggy. It was low tide, the yellowish stalks of weeds and lily pads exposed where the water had receded. The smell of mud hung in the air."

Skinny invites his estranged children to visit him on the reservation during a week of revival meetings. "But in the kitchen he saw he hadn't lowered the burner enough and the sauce had cooked down to a thick paste that clung like cobwebs to the meatballs. The water he'd simmered for the pasta had almost all boiled away. Above the sink, the window was fogged over with steam." In his hastily built house with the rickety dock, he imagines the weekend will provide an opportunity to say goodbye to his teenage kids; he hopes that, in turn, he will finally feel accepted by them. But his kids do not live on the reservation and don't understand its traditions, nor do they care to.

Skinny's health improves and he appears again in "Homecoming," in which he offers a job to Marcus, who has been sent to live with his grandmother in King William County after both his parents were arrested for selling drugs. "Homecoming" showcases the poor choices Marcus makes in light of his circumstances and the inevitability that his fate will reflect that of his parents. Here, Skinny functions as a sort of role model to Marcus. Although Skinny's body is failing him, he remains resolute and full of life.

As a whole, this is a collection about accepting the results of choices both good and bad and learning to live with a new reality. The

characters in *Mattaponi Queen* are down on their luck, but are working hard to get to the weekend so that they can pop open a can of beer and maybe go fishing. But things seldom turn out as planned. These are stories of divorce and illness, heartache and loneliness, yet also a reedy determination to get up, wash the sleep from one's face, put on the coffee, and move forward with another day.

These characters do not pity themselves or their situations. Perhaps this is best realized in "Imperial Chrysanthemum," one of the strongest pieces in the collection and initially published in the *Paris Review*. In the story Mrs. Cutie Young's silver has been stolen and her nurse, Loretta, the narrator, drives her throughout King William County to search for the \$40,000 family heirloom. Loretta's voice is unforgettable.

"I don't think the Squire will get us to Petersburg. I also don't think we're gonna find your silver there."

"I have a feeling," she sniffs. I know that you are thinking: why doesn't that fool pick up the telephone? Her *name* is written on the silver. Well, the answer is that her name isn't on some of the serving pieces; the pattern's too crowded."

Unbeknownst to Cutie, Loretta is working to pay off a riverboat, *Mattaponi Queen*, and when she does so she will quit. Cutie is mean

and revengeful, but it is Loretta who carries the knowledge of what happened to the silver.

Belle Boggs' stories offer a variety of solutions, both rational and irrational, for the hard times that have befallen the people of King William County. The characters in *Mattaponi Queen* cannot escape difficult times, but part of what makes them memorable is how they hold out hope for tomorrow.

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—Melissa Fraterrigo