

STRUGGLING WITH THE UNUTTERABLE: *TWO MOONS IN AUGUST*

Two moons in August. Martha Brooks. Greenwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1991. 157 pp., \$14.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88899-123-1.

In the world of children's books, a good story is something to hold on to. A work with the literary grace of *Two moons in August* is something to treasure. Martha Brooks has created a portrait of a family struggling with death and loss, and it is one that a young reader will cherish as much for its lilting prose as for its believable and captivating story.

We are immediately drawn into sixteen-year-old Sidonie's world, into the summer of 1959, a year after her mother's death following a protracted illness. Her father, although kindly and loving, has buried himself in his work at the tuberculosis sanatorium, and her university-aged sister, Roberta, spends most of her time with a medical intern named Phil, who also acts as a friend and substitute big brother for Sidonie.

Through flashback vignettes, we get a deftly-painted picture of Sidonie's mother. In the present, we see that none of the family members has come to terms with her death, despite it underlying virtually every conversation they have. Father and daughters love each other, but are in danger of losing that bond because they cannot acknowledge, and thus begin to lay to rest, the searing pain they all still feel.

Sidonie's summer begins to look up with the arrival of Kieran, a gorgeous teenager with family problems of his own. Ultimately, a crisis in his life draws her beyond her pain and confusion, and by the end of the summer the healing process has finally started for the whole family. A poignant counterpoint to these events is Roberta's not-quite romance with Phil.

Throughout, Brooks's writing is lean and subtle, giving the reader that too-rare commodity: credit for intelligence. She skillfully sketches the characters so that we feel we know them intimately from the start. In addition, powerful images glow on almost every page: Sidonie lives in a Western Canadian valley with a lake that "floats in its belly;" after a late night, Roberta "slips, quiet as a lullaby, into her bedroom." The colourful 50s-era references may prompt some intergenerational discussions about jazz, melon balls in ginger ale, and Esther Williams.

Yes, Sidonie's abrupt exit from arguments with Kieran that bring up her mother do get repetitive. But that is nitpicking compared to Brooks's sensitive illustration of the tension in the family's tacit agreement on the unutterable, and of the terrible guilt haunting the daughters. When that tension is finally broken by tears and the sharing of what has been suppressed, we are almost as relieved as the characters.

Two moons in August will be cherished by young adolescent readers, particularly girls who can relate to Sidonie's feelings of isolation and tentative romance. It is the kind of book that justifies the "literature" in "children's literature."

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