

My Abandonment

by Peter Rock

(Blackstone Audio, 2009)

“My abandonment” is a novel that evokes emotions that range from curiosity to almost horror. The narrator is Caroline, who tells of living since her childhood “under the radar” of society in the Pacific Northwest. Father provides for and educates her in school subjects and in the ways of being virtually invisible to the outside world. From their small cave in the forest outside Portland, Oregon, they go into the city to buy supplies, visit the library, and retrieve the monthly military stipend. Father’s dreams of helicopters reveal him to be a Vietnam veteran suffering from paranoia due to post-traumatic stress.

Life for Caroline is a strict set of rules designed to keep her and Father concealed from all enemies, including most other homeless people, but especially from society. At age 13, an error on her part causes them to be detained by social services personnel, who later try to help them with a home, job, and school. Father’s paranoia eventually overrules this new start. They disappear into the Oregon countryside, where an error on Father’s part changes their lives forever.

Throughout, Caroline is dispassionate and virtually without emotion. No excitement, no anxiety, no sorrow, no tears. She seems to have been taught by Father to be so self-controlled that nothing rattles her; and in this way she will very seldom attract attention to herself. She keeps one toy with her always, a plastic horse with a small hole in its belly where it once was mounted on a table stand. The scrap of paper Caroline keeps inside the horse’s belly is one of the gripping horrors of this novel, for it contains the name Caroline remembers having before her name was Caroline. Another horror is the story she eventually relates to the reader of how she and Father came to be a family, and how she considers adopting Father’s actions to build her own family.

The backdrop of homelessness raises many questions. Why do some people adopt homelessness as a choice of lifestyle (distinct from economic hardship)? Father’s homelessness was related to his mental illness, but later Caroline continued to be homeless when she did not have to be. She traveled to her former home in Boise and saw her sister and foster family, but did not make herself known to them. Having been abandoned by Father, even if he did not choose it, Caroline now abandons herself to all attachments. Has she adjusted so fully to her life with Father that she has become as mentally ill as he was?

An interesting aspect of this novel is that a person can follow the story on maps, finding the locations of cities, streets, parks, libraries, etc. One can see the route and imagine walking across St. Johns Bridge from Forest Park outside Portland, Oregon, to the St. Johns Library on N. Charleston Avenue. It is more troubling to find on a map the elementary school where Caroline watches a young girl play softball, imagines her as a new sister, and tries to attract her with conversation.

Libraries and librarians come off pretty well in this novel. The reader understands that the librarian at St. Johns in Portland knows Caroline and Father are homeless, and tries with a brilliantly light hand to help with information and reading materials. Later, it is a librarian who gives Caroline a job.

“My abandonment” is a good read, but don’t expect it to make you feel wonderful. Expect, instead, to be provoked and troubled.

Linda Ginn

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