

OFF RADAR: ‘The Oracle Pool’ by Agnes Bushell

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By Dana Wilde

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In Agnes Bushell’s new novel, “The Oracle Pool,” the main character is missing for most of the book.

At the outset, Ruth is with a tour group investigating archaeological sites in Turkey. The participants divide out into, roughly, two groups: graduate students acquiring firsthand knowledge, and mostly older tourists interested in ancient ruins. Ruth is aligned by age and motivation with the grad students. But we learn pretty quickly that she is somewhat aloof from everybody, has difficulties having fun, and is generally a somewhat insecure, over-thoughtful, unhappy person who knows it.

Crisis strikes in the first few pages. The group is visiting an obscure, off-the-beaten-path site which millennia earlier was an oracle temple of Apollo, but is now submerged in water. Ruth has a strange experience of a flashing light. About the same time, a prankish, adventurous younger member, Jack, decides to look inside the temple, so he dives in the water and disappears into the entrance. When he doesn’t resurface, panic starts to set in. Younger members dive in to see if they can find him. They can’t.

The police are called. The group is shattered and heads back to their hotel in the nearby town. Ruth, following a long afternoon of rampant rumination, impulsively (unusual for her) joins two of the younger members in a night vigil for Jack at the oracle pool. The night is punctuated by getting lost and weird dreams, which jostle Ruth in ways she never would have expected. One of her companions is Viola, an extremely edgy young artist whose main character traits are malcontent and the F word. Viola, along with her mother and her mother’s fiancée, [cq] will become players later in the hunt for Ruth.

For the story cuts next to Brooklyn, where Ruth’s aunt Grace (a minister and Ruth’s childhood guardian), is visited by Orestes Brown, Viola’s brother. (His name clearly points to the 19th century transcendentalist writer Orestes Brownson, though I do not know enough about Brownson to understand why.) Orestes tells Grace about the incident in Turkey, and also that Ruth is posting strange writings on the internet from some unknown location, possibly in Turkey. Or maybe war-torn Syria. Or elsewhere. In short, no one knows where Ruth is.



“The Oracle Pool” by Agnes Bushell; Littoral Books, Portland, Maine, 2020; 238 pages, trade paperback, \$20

So eventually Grace decides to look for her. She enlists the help of her long-ago lover Artemas, with whom she decades ago drove across Turkey and the Iranian desert with another friend, Sabina, a NYC artist of self-sufficient means. Within the story of the rescue mission we hear, in mnemonic parallel, the story of the long-ago trip. Meanwhile, Orestes, an adventure journalist, also sets out for Turkey to find Ruth. Romantic encounters; narrow escapes; exceptionally vivid descriptions of hot, dusty Turkey and Turkish characters; ruminations on Grace, Artemas and Sabina's past; and clues and rumors about Ruth's whereabouts, including references to her disturbingly mystical blog postings, then dominate the story, which winds up back in New York City.

The main literary themes of "The Oracle Pool" are transformation and self-discovery, particularly as they are fostered and expressed through art – whether ancient architecture, or painful postmodern installation. Or, as evidenced in the character unseen, through words peeling back layers of psychic history – Ruth's transformation takes place, intriguingly, out of sight of the book's main narrative, clued only through summaries of her mysterious blog posts by characters who don't know her very well.

"The Oracle Pool" is another thoughtful, warmly human book, characterized by exceptionally lucid prose, by one of Maine's best fiction writers. [Agnes Bushell's](#) other novels include "The House On Perry Street," "Local Deities," "[Asian Vespers](#)" and Portland-based mysteries such as "Death in Arcadia." Bushell and her husband, Jim Bushell, operate Littoral Books in Portland. "The Oracle Pool" is available through [Littoral's website](#) and local book sellers.

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