

# Agnes Bushell's latest novel blossoms into kaleidoscope

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By William David Barry

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When “The Oracle Pool,” an enchanting, or perhaps enchanted, novel opens, Jack is laughing.

## Local review

### “The Oracle Pool”

By Agnes Bushell

Littoral Books

Paperback, 225 pages. \$20

“His laugh carried. His voice carried. So early in the morning, and already he was assuming his back-of-the-bus role as Comedy Central Carian Correspondent (‘It’s Jack Swann here, reporting from ancient Caria, on this fifth day of pilgrimage in the exciting world of tumulus tombs, oracular caves and egg and dart moldings...’) and already Ruth was finding it annoying.”

In this 12th novel by Maine writer Agnes Bushell, the reader is wafted along on a journey, or journeys, both geographic and spiritual starting at a sanctuary pool in present-day Turkey (ancient Caria) that begins with Jack Swann diving, heedlessly, into a deep, flooded temple. He fails to emerge alive, though his voice and persona carry through the rest of the story. His dramatic swan song leads to quests, questions from fellow tourists and perhaps an awakening for fellow traveler Ruth Gaffary, who soon also disappears as she searches for meaning in her own life. Friends, family members, pilgrims and Turkish authorities are all anxious to learn of Ruth’s fate, wondering if she is alive or dead.



Cover courtesy of Littoral Books

Bits of intriguing souls from many cultures and backgrounds flicker in and out of this carefully handled, delightfully readable kaleidoscope of a volume. The novel moves neatly from Turkey to Greece to New York City to the explosive Syrian frontier offering a cast of curious characters that could fill a Russian novel. But “The Oracle Pool” is much more effervescent, passing colorfully through the contemporary art scene, archaeological sites, ancient religions, sexual possibilities and love, where the living commingle with the dead. Readers

must submit to the flow of the strange narrative and questing individuals – those who like simple linear stories will be disappointed. But readers who can take a kaleidoscope for what it is will find their time well-rewarded.

Bushell runs publishing company Littoral Books in Portland with her husband, Jim. Her previous works include “Local Deities” and “Days of the Dead.”

Two of the main characters in “The Oracle Pool” are Grace, Ruth’s aunt, mentor and a clergywoman; and Artemas Jones, Grace’s oldest friend and a man of many talents. Throughout the novel, Bushell is attracted to the everyday collisions of the cognizant and the mundane, as in this passage, between those two:

Grace “was wiping her eyes with her handkerchief when Artemas came through the doorway holding a large white bakery bag in his hand and humming. Then he caught sight of the handkerchief. ‘What’s wrong?’ ‘Nothing. Ruth was just here but she left. She’s going to Santa Fe.’ ‘Huh,’ Artemas said, ‘plain, poppy seed and onion. They were out of sesame.’”

Some of the character/seekers find resolution in the course of the novel; others find the next meal, or maybe more. Just when you think you’ve got it, the pilgrimage moves on. “The Oracle Pool” is a work that challenges – and delights.

*William David Barry is a local historian who has authored/co-authored seven books, including “Maine: The Wilder Side of New England” and “Deering: A Social and Architectural History.” He is currently writing a history of the Maine Historical Society. He lives in Portland with his wife, Debra, and their cat, Nadine.*

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