

BUSHNELL ON BOOKS: ‘The Buoyant Letters of Mimsy Bell’ and ‘ The Prints of Siri Beckman’

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THE BUOYANT LETTERS OF MIMSY BELL

Mimsy Bell is an aging rock star, a survivor of the sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll eras of the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. She is 80 years old now and has returned to her western Maine hometown of Menotomy to do two things: find a place to be buried, and to settle an old score with the river.

This is the debut novel of midcoast Maine author Laurel Dodge, an imaginative writer whose brilliant combination of plot, characters and atmosphere display an engaging originality seldom seen in a first novel. This is a powerful story of remembrance, regret and redemption, balanced carefully with humor, tragedy, sadness and contentment.

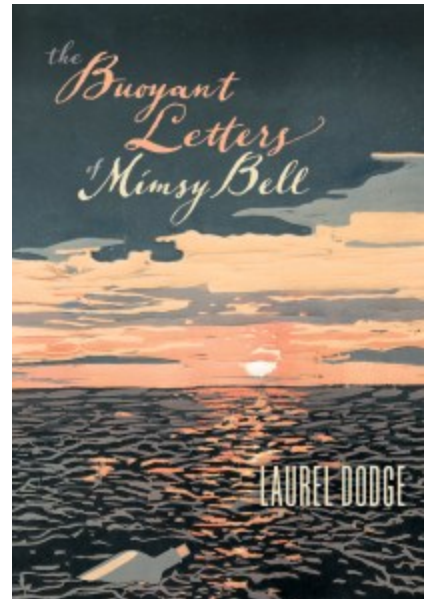
Mimsy is widowed and wealthy, hoping to keep a low profile, but too many people remember her as a wild, headstrong girl who left town for the glamour of a rock musician’s life. Now, however, she plans her final resting place and confronts the river that took so much from her 60 years before. Her young lover then, Gerald, drowned in the river, robbing Mimsy of her young true love. She writes letters to Gerald, seals them in antique bottles, and tosses the bottles into the river — tender letters for Gerald, words of disdain for the river.

She befriends the local police officer and a young boy who rides a unicycle and plays the fiddle, along with the aging minister whose grief drives him to serve, and a curious bookworm who holds a secret that will stun her. However, Mimsy finds love again with an 85-year old former band member, starts a rockabilly band and composes her own music.

She is a good person who has suffered both heartbreak and remarkable happiness: “I am exactly where I want to be, doing exactly what I want to do.” And people love her for it.

THE PRINTS OF SIRI BECKMAN: ENGRAVING A SENSE OF PLACE

Of art, British engraver Eric Gill (1882-1940) said: “Art is skill, and that is the first meaning of the word.” To be a wood engraver and woodcut artist requires the consummate skills of vision, imagination, patience and dexterity. And that perfectly



THE BUOYANT LETTERS OF MIMSY BELL by Laurel Dodge; Littoral Books, 2023; 187 pages, \$20; ISBN 979-8-9878057-4-9.

describes Bath artist Siri Beckman.

“The Prints of Siri Beckman” is her book of more than 100 wood engravings and woodcut images, and her explanations of how and why she has devoted more than 40 years to these delicate and detailed art forms. These two art forms are part of the larger genre known as the book arts, enjoying a renewed interest as people appreciate the creative thought and painstaking labor to produce just one 3×3 inch woodcut, for example.

She explains wood engraving as a “relief printmaking method,” incising elaborately detailed images on wood blocks from the boxwood, maple, cherry or pear trees, using special hand-tools like point and round gravers, angle tints and lining tools. A single 6×8-inch wood engraving takes 40-50 hours to produce (and that’s if you don’t make any mistakes).

Woodcuts, she tells, are often made on basswood, birch plywood and pine using slender Japanese hand tools like a V-gouge, U-gouge, flat chisel and angled chisel. The image examples in the book show the remarkable detail of landscapes, people, animals, still-life scenes and even include several with tinted color added to the usual black and white.

Beckman lived in Stonington for many years, so many of her images reflect her life there. And she admits: “I created my prints as a celebration of my life and to share that with others.” She lives now in Bath, and still celebrates her life with her beautiful and unique art work.

Bill Bushnell lives and writes in Harpswell.

Comments are not available on this story.

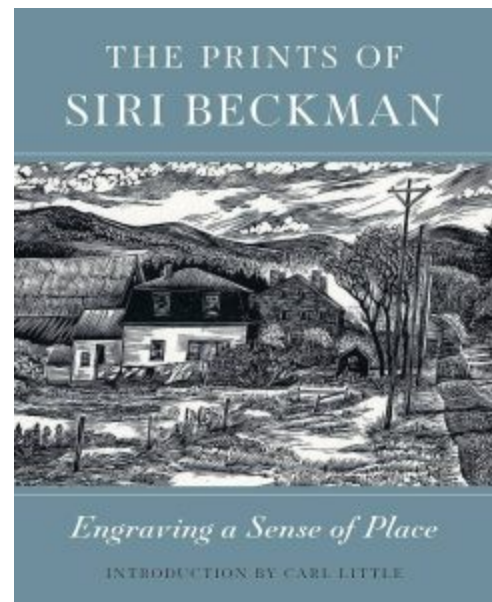
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