

A musician returns – and reconnects – to her Maine hometown after decades

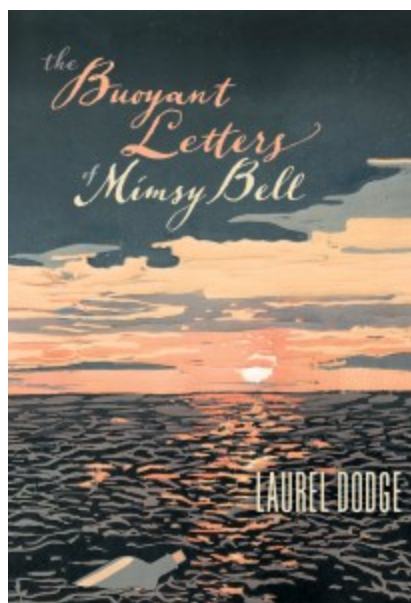
pressherald.com/2024/07/28/a-musician-returns-and-reconnects-to-her-maine-hometown-after-decades

July 28, 2024

“I have so many cities under my belt,” the narrator of this unpredictable epistolary novel thinks early on in “The Buoyant Letters of Mimsy Bell.” Bell is a woman who left her Maine hometown decades ago for a musician’s life on the road. By the time the book begins, Mimsy is 80 years old and has returned home after the death of Lawrence, her longtime musical and romantic partner. But it’s another lost love to whom she’s writing in the letters that largely comprise this novel: Gerald, her first love, who drowned in a nearby river at the age of 21.

A little over halfway through the novel, the first by Mainer Laurel Dodge, Mimsy reflects on her own long life. “Do we always return to our beginnings before we meet our ends?” she writes — and while aging is a running theme in Dodge’s novel, it isn’t the most prominent one. Instead, Dodge traces the way that Mimsy reconnects — sometimes haltingly, sometimes warmly — with the town that she left behind decades earlier. This takes different forms: She strikes up a deep friendship with a local police officer. She finds new collaborators for her musical endeavors — and she makes the occasional trip to Brownfield for live music.

Local review



“The Buoyant Letters of Mimsy Bell”

By Laurel Dodge

Littoral Books

\$20

Mimsy's occasionally wry, often insightful observations on the world around her make for a memorable narrative voice. One running subplot follows Mimsy's quest for a new house, though she also muses on the inherent paradox of ownership here: "I forgot that when you buy a house in Maine, you have to accept that it won't really be yours until you leave it." And she possesses no small amount of self-knowledge, including this candid reflection: "I only grew up myself about two decades ago."

As befits a novel made up of letters, "The Buoyant Letters of Mimsy Bell" has an episodic structure, first following Mimsy as she gets acclimated to her hometown and then exploring how she revisits two very different people from her past: a former bandmate, whose connection to her may be deeper than either anticipate; and a middle-aged man with a fondness for books and an unexpected tie to the recipient of Mimsy's letters. That connection, in turn, forces her to re-evaluate all that she thought she knew about the long-dead Gerald and their romance and introduces an unexpected tension between two correspondents, one of whom has been dead for more than half a century.

As Dodge follows Mimsy through adventures in real estate, an unexpected romance and a traumatic act that leaves a member of her chosen family adrift, the novel returns again and again to certain motifs (which feels appropriate, given Mimsy's history as a musician). One of them is the nature of community itself. Mimsy's eagerness to meet new people and rethink old relationships is both admirable and iconoclastic.

Both Mimsy and the novelist are concerned with the legacies we leave behind — both artistically and financially. Mimsy has seen her hometown change dramatically since her youth, with small businesses shuttered in the presence of chain retailers and pristine woodlands demolished to make way for developments. Gradually, Mimsy's efforts to preserve certain spaces becomes a larger and larger element of the novel, and the description of one woman's efforts to create a legacy on her own terms becomes quite moving.

At one point, Mimsy writes to Gerald that "You and I are an unfinished novel." And for all of the relative formality of the epistolary form, this is not a book in which characters can be easily pinned down. Several die abruptly; a conflict between two other major characters takes place largely off the page, which feels of a piece with this book's thoroughly humanistic sensibility. Of course, these characters are also the protagonists of their own novels, even if we aren't able to read them.

"The Buoyant Letters of Mimsy Bell" is a novel of small graces: a late-in-life friendship, a renewed commitment to an artistic vocation, a quiet act of kindness. Like the melodies the title character plays, it carries plenty of emotional weight. Like the river that haunts it, it rarely

takes you where you'd expect.

New York City resident Tobias Carroll is the author of five books, most recently the novel "In the Sight." He has reviewed books for The New York Times, Bookforum, the Star Tribune and elsewhere.

The somewhat definitive ranking of Emily Henry novels

Maine island mystique: Why so many books feature these isolated settings

filed under:

Midcoast Go, review

© 2024