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Dark, horrific, gripping, luminous

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Published Saturday, Feb. 23, 2008 12:00AM EST

Last updated Wednesday, Aug. 26, 2009 02:12PM EDT

Mercurial and mesmerizing, dark but thrilling, Mary Swan's *The Boys in the Trees* is a splendid book that, once started, is very hard to put down. In this her first novel, Swan (the winner of the prestigious 2001 O. Henry First Prize for short fiction with her collection *The Deep and Other Stories*) probes the hidden and shadowed side of life.

Set in Emden, a fictitious, late 19th-century Ontario factory town, Swan's novel offers a familiar cast: an assortment of families, their individual children, some spinsters and widows, a local doctor, a minister, a photographer and his assistant, a businessman who owns everything.

- **The Boys in the Trees**, by Mary Swan, Henry Holt, 214 pages, \$15.50

Various circumstances, sometimes downturns in fortune or mistakes of judgment, have brought them to this far-off settlement on a secondary road. Most of them struggle to get by and sacrifice to give some education to their children. Ordinary, God-fearing Christians, they attend church faithfully. The worst of them frequent Malley's tavern and a few occasionally visit the "upstairs room[s] on Neeve Street."

After the loss of their first three children to diphtheria, William Heath and his wife Naomi emigrate from England to Canada, eventually settling in Emden. Their resettlement is fraught with difficulties. Accused of embezzlement, Heath, a pillar of the Sunday school, who gave "not a hint of his black, black heart," murders his wife Naomi and two Canadian-born daughters, Rachel and Lilian.

Miss Alice, who runs a school in her home, was the one who answered the knocking that fateful day, "not thunderous, not desperate, just knocking." Eleven-year-old Eaton, one of the children around the table, remembers that "Miss Alice came back and said that Rachel's father needed her for a moment and she put down her pencil, left her book lying open on the table ...[and] walked out into the blue day that swallowed her up."

The magic of Swan's fiction is in her ability to reveal and conceal at the same time

Trying to comprehend the horrific event, Eaton remembers the story of Abraham and Isaac from Sunday school. Reverend Toller "had talked about Abraham's anguish, knowing that he would have to slay his only son." Eaton notes that Toller says nothing "about what it was like for Isaac, tied to the altar, looking up at the knife in his own father's hand."

Naturally, Eaton's father's insistence that no one could have known or prevented what Heath had planned is no consolation. "Eaton thought that made it even worse, the idea that anything at all could happen at any time, that there was no one there to stop it."

The Boys in the Trees shifts smoothly through frequent changes in time and place, explores numerous characters (each deftly drawn), and develops through various engaging perspectives. Swan's fastidious attention to detail never lags or bogs down.

As well as being a gripping story, the work is also a meditation on the seemingly insignificant: a button, a faded photograph, a broken knife, the stamp on its blade, a child's handmade book, a door, a locket, a gun, a tree, a stone kicked into a corner, a life.

Nothing is what it seems. The crucial thing is really something else. Something key to everything, something buried or passed over, something missed in the need to move forward, something quietly there all along.

Like the students in the room Miss Alice has turned into a pin-hole camera, Swan's readers often blink and discover that they see "a tree upside down."

"Do you all see it? Miss Alice said, and they all said they did. ... Miss Alice said it was Science. ... That was why they saw the tree, the stone wall of the factory, even though these things were behind them, and turned the other way. ... She said that what they had seen was real, not magic, although it was very like magic."

The magic of Swan's fiction is in her ability to reveal and conceal at the same time. Her characters and her readers are simultaneously enmeshed in a fiction real as illusionary life. The pleasure for the reader is in the smudged distinctions between reality, memory, dream, illusion and image - the sense of being played by a fine mind and enjoying it.

"I am most interested in the ripples caused by events, and the way so many things, especially human beings themselves, are ultimately unknowable," Swan states in the book's six-page appendix.

In the way that a photographer's hypo washes away "all the extra salt that could spoil the plate later, [leaving] only what has been touched by the light," the ripples Swan crafts in *The Boys in the Trees* reveal layers of darkness as textured and shaded - even luminous - to anyone familiar with looking deeply into shadows.

Lynda Grace Philippsen, of Surrey, B.C., is a contributor to Half in the Sun: Anthology of Mennonite Writing.