

Young Adult Reader | A mother's quick death, but daughter's sweet remembrance

Cures for Heartbreak

By Margo Rabb

Delacorte. 238 pp. \$15.99

Reviewed by Katie Haegele

'Unrequited or not, during even the most awful day a crush could change everything - it could make you forget the two classes you failed last semester, and the general overall suckiness of your life.'

That's 16-year-old Mia Pearlman, the protagonist of Margo Rabb's incredibly moving first novel, three months after her mother's death.

Rabb learned early on about life's potential suckiness herself. In an afterword, she writes about losing both her parents in very early adulthood, making no bones about the fact that parts of this novel are rooted in real life.

The thing that takes us beyond the particulars of setting and character is the quality of the writing.

Rabb is funny and insightful, and she really digs deep. Mia's mom, Greta, is diagnosed with skin cancer and is dead in 12 days. The stories in this novel are about her death, but also about her life and the deeper understanding Mia has of it as time goes by.

Mia and her mother loved to leave Queens for an evening and go into Manhattan to see the ballet. But as much as they enjoyed swanning around the Lincoln Center, Mia remembers her mother's saying that a dancer's life wasn't a good one. "You couldn't see it on the dancers' faces, but underneath they were all in pain - bloody toes, torn ligaments. . . . That dancers hid their suffering seemed noble; they endured pain for something beautiful. And I'd been unable to make that sacrifice, or even come close; self-absorbed, I'd embraced my pain, shouted it, flaunted it, as if it was something unique."

The titled chapters - much more like linked short stories than pieces of a novel - open with quotations that read like a who's who of women writers who girls want to grow up to be: Katherine Mansfield, Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Cynthia Ozick.

Mansfield's quotation is probably the most apt: "That is the fearful part of having been near death. One knows how easy it is to die. The barriers that are up for everybody else are down for you, and you've only to slip through." Mia comes to understand that her mother's quick decline could have been about more than just her illness.

" 'It was your mother's depression,' " Greta's old friend tells Mia on the phone, shocking her. " 'Really, it's not so different from Elsa or Jack. Or from Rolf. I've seen it happen to so many people. . . . ' " These people, Elsa, Jack, Rolf and Mia's mom, were all Holocaust survivors or children of survivors, people who had found relative safety in America, but not peace.

The Holocaust casts a long shadow over all the characters in this book. More than a precursor to Mia's personal loss, it's a history that keeps on ringing. As Rabb writes with such devastating effect, it's "like a quiet, daily kind of war, the war that my mother and my family lived through, which lived through them, which never ended."

One stunning scene takes place when Mia goes back to school just a few days after her mother's funeral. Sitting in history class, she's supposed to do a tidy write-up of the World War II chapter and turn it in.

But she's transfixed by a picture taken of a concentration camp, a tangle of arms and legs. That brutality is all mixed up with the disease that ruined her mother's body, and she can't move.

The stories Rabb tells are not just about death, but about love, too - often both at once. Mia meets a boy in the hospital who has cancer, and she tries to console his mother by telling her *bashert*, a Yiddish word she'd heard her mother use to mean fate, a what-can-you-do kind of sentiment. Later she looks it up and discovers it can also mean soulmate, the person you're destined to be

with. "And it seemed right that the same word could be used in instances of both love and death," Mia concludes.

This is an odd book to get the "young adult" designation, not because the subject matter is difficult, but because it's so incredibly nuanced, and there's something in the quality of understanding that feels more like remembering adolescence than living through it. Still, understand it Rabb does. I can't decide if her book belongs in the plain old adult category, or if more books designated for young adults should be like this one. Or if everybody, regardless of age, should read this novel - witty, warm, and gorgeous its its fearlessness.

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