

Drowning Ruth, Christina Schwarz
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Review by David Eaton Mauk

Drowning Ruth is a richly textured historical novel that weaves through the lives of two sisters, Amanda and Mathilda, and Mattie's daughter Ruth, in the rural lake region of Wisconsin in 1919. "Ruth remembered drowning," is the startling opening line, which sets the tragic mystery in motion.

This enthralling first novel by *Atlantic Monthly* contributor, Christina Schwarz, focuses the lens on the trait of suffering in silence, as the story gets told by switching between the many voices of the different characters. This interesting technique can initially be hard for the reader to follow, but we soon realize the pay-off, as characters reveal their inner voices and we hear of suspicion, jealousy, inadequacy, fear and self-preservation.

Amanda, the story's complex central character, is introduced to us as she leaves her employment of nursing wounded WWI veterans, under questionable circumstances. "So I agreed to go home, not to the Milwaukie boarding house full of unmarried nurses where Eliza and I had carefully divided the freezing, mustard-colored room into her side and my side, but back to the farm where I had grown up, where the snowy hills were white as bleached linen and where my sister rocked her little girl to sleep beside the kitchen stove while she waited for her husband to come back from the war. I knew that, at home where I belonged, I could set myself right again."

The reader isn't so sure about this as Amanda's unbalanced emotions and overbearing behavior emerges. "I suppose people will say it was my fault, that if I'd not gone home that March in 1919, Mathilda, my only sister, would not be dead. But I did go home. The way I saw it, I hadn't any choice." She constantly buries the truth and clips the wings of those around her, causing the reader to ask "why," a question the author provokes throughout much of the story. It's this layer-by-layer unfolding of Amanda's secrets that propels the plot forward. Why have these sisters, bound together since their childhood, been torn apart? Why is Amanda so protective of Ruth? What really happened on the ice that winter night in 1919? What else might be behind Amanda's obsession with a family who summers at the lake? Amanda came home to bury the truth of her many secrets, but we learn that life is rarely at ease without consequences. We wonder what hers will be.

The compelling human dramas of endurance and dealing with adversity are skillfully explored without excessive sentimentality or melodrama. The multiple character crises are compassionately handled with a pace that's almost hypnotic, where the reader adjusts to the rituals of the women only to be jolted by another revelation about past secrets that sneak into their present lives.

Drowning Ruth is closely tied to the time and place of its historical setting. The author said at a writer's conference that she wanted to "explore the emotional landscape through the physical one...life's paradoxes, mysteries, ambiguities and transitions," where "history is like a character, telling a better story because it adds meaning." She accomplishes this in her *NY Times* bestseller, where the reader is left satisfied, but unsettled at the same time.