
Pro Rege

Volume 42 | Number 1

Article 5

September 2013

Mourning Hours (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2013) "Mourning Hours (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 42: No. 1, 31.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol42/iss1/5

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Book Reviews

DeBoard, Paula Treick. *The Mourning Hours*. New York: Harlequin Mira, 2013. 321 pp. ISBN-13: 978-7783-1497-4. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, emeritus professor of English, Dordt College. Published previously in Siouxlander.blogspot.com.

If a new novel acknowledges you in the preface, if it's by a former student, if it mentions, at the outset, a town named Oostburg, Wisconsin, my home town, then what's not to like, right?

The Mourning Hours, a first novel from Paula Treick DeBoard, hits all those notes, so you can take almost everything I say as the braying of a grandpa or some other privileged relative.

Her novel is a wild page-turner, a mystery, sort of, a story that uses a ton of domestic realism, and features the thoughtful memories of a young woman named Kirsten, who once upon a time watched her Wisconsin farm family disintegrate under self-inflicted guilt and the disapproving eyes of a community that turned their back on them in a time of dire need.

What it doesn't tell you until the end—and what I'm not going to—is exactly what happened one night when Kirsten's brother Johnny, a high school wrestling star, came home from a date that crashed, as did he in his truck, in the middle of a snowstorm. He and his girlfriend Stacy, a pushy young lady if there ever was one, got into a spat right there in the ditch, he claimed, and she, ticked off, started walking home. There was a snowstorm, and somehow she never made it.

What honestly did happen that fateful night, as they say, is the goods the novel withholds. Instead, Ms. DeBoard watches a family disintegrate under the dishonor they sustain from what amounts to a mob rising perilously in the neighborhood, as well as their own inability to believe that son Johnny could possibly be as innocent as he claims. What you watch, sometimes very painfully, is a family imploding, basically, from cataclysmic self-doubt.

I'm not a really good reader. It takes something to engage me fully, but *The Mourning Hours* is a novel you can't put down, even though it has little in the way of action/adventure. The publisher, oddly enough, is Harlequin. I'll admit it—I was expecting some kind of romance, even though my memory of Paula Treick as a student doesn't include a penchant for rampant passion on the edge of some sandstone cliff.

And it isn't. There's no romance in the novel. Even

the high school love at the heart of things is not only woeful but doubtful.

What the novel is, is visual, remarkably and thoughtfully visual. You see what's going on. Paula's eye is her great strength. *The Mourning Hours* brings you in because the author sees what she's describing. She's an accomplished writer. Truth be told, I remember her strengths, even though she occupied a memorable place in my classroom some time ago.

I don't know what Paula thinks these days about feminism, but, other than Kristen the narrator, she spares nothing on her major female characters. I hesitate to use the b-word, but if I were given to say such things, I'll readily admit both Johnny's mother or his girl earn the title. His mother has something of a reason to go off the deep end; she tries to wage a fiery defense of her boy when a cheesehead lynch mob turns on them horribly.

Stacy is as assertive as some pulling guard from the Packers' offensive line. What Johnny sees in her—sans sex—is something no one else does, save Kirsten, who, as a little girl, basically worships her as if she were Barbie.

And I do wish Paula would have given us a clearer Johnny. She's got her reasons to keep him out of focus; after all, Kirsten is a kid when he's already 17. She's only beginning to understand character. But the novel is a reminiscence and not a diary, a plot line bookended by a "years later" story. We don't really know much about Johnny, and he is at the very heart of things. Character sometimes gets a little flattened, I think, by the desire to keep readers turning pages.

But I really loved reading the novel—yes, maybe for reasons that go beyond the story itself. Paula is still, after a fashion, one of my students; and, yes, she's telling stories on my own home turf. And I admit it—I had great trouble putting it down.

She did wonderfully on this, her first. I promise to read everything she writes. Another, I hear, is in the works.

Great summer reading, methinks. She gets an A. And pardon the braying.