

FICTION

In This Novel, a Grisly Discovery Leads to Self-Discovery

By Jenny Rosenstrach

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THE BOY IN THE FIELD

By Margot Livesey

In the broadest sense, Margot Livesey's exquisite novel "The Boy in the Field" is a whodunit. Who attacked this boy in the middle of the day and left him for dead in a field? What would have happened if three unsuspecting siblings walking home from school hadn't caught a glimpse of his red sock from the road? Why this boy? Was there something suspicious about the blue car with the dented bumper that didn't stop to help?

But the real mysteries lie elsewhere, specifically and most compellingly with the characters who are witnesses to the crime. When Hugo Price, the lead detective assigned to the attack (with a wedding ring and a close shave, he defies all stereotypes of the hard-boiled sleuth), meets with one of the siblings who discovered the boy, he summarizes the book's thrust: "You're wrestling with the problem of evil," Price tells the teenage Matthew. "I'm twice your age, and I'm still wrestling with it. Nothing prepares one for the discovery that there are people who have no conscience."


Livesey's writing is quiet, observant and beautifully efficient — there's not an extra word or scene in the entire book — and yet simultaneously so cinematic, you can hear the orchestral soundtrack as you tear through the pages. Consider the discovery itself, seen through the eyes of the artistic youngest sibling, Duncan, who imagines the view from the perspective of one of the birds overhead: "Looking down at the boy lying in the grass, his blue shirt and black shorts and red legs ending in black trainers, slightly dusty, pointing at the sky. And the three of them in their white shirts, kneeling beside him, keeping vigil."

The story is told through alternating perspectives of the three siblings, each of whom we come to love and root for.

Before Matthew, Duncan and their older sister, Zoe, encounter the boy in the field and the shroud of evil that surrounds him, their lives appear on the surface about as idyllic as they do predictable: They live with their parents, Hal and Betsy, in a small town outside of Oxford, England. Inside their house with the tightly pruned rose bushes and the front door painted ultramarine ("not navy") the family moves in chaotic, happy rhythms — eating fish pies for dinner (in the kitchen because the dining room is crammed with school projects), caroling on the holidays, doting on the charming family dog, Lily. In addition to her job as a solicitor, their mom takes a night class in ancient Greek, after announcing "she'd always wanted to read the 'Odyssey' in the original." Each year, their town holds a fund-raiser with an old-fashioned theme (scenes from famous movies) and the teenagers not only don't ridicule the event, but genuinely enjoy planning and attending it. Their small worlds seem happy, normal, forward-looking, safe.

But after the discovery of the boy (a teenage hospital worker named Karel, whose life they wind up saving) and their collective awakening to the world as a potentially violent place, everything changes. Matthew finds himself silently interrogating the houses and privet hedges along the streets he's walked his whole life, streets so safe and comfortable that he's never before even registered them. Zoe goes through the motions, hanging out with friends and studying, but "it was as if her hair had stopped growing. A change, invisible to most other people, had overtaken her." Duncan, who was adopted, is stunned by his mother's response ("Did something happen?") when he requests help searching for his biological mother. "Of course something happened," he says to himself. "They had found Karel in the field." As the investigation marches on, the siblings, who aren't allowed to discuss the crime outside of their house, retreat into isolation, heading down their own paths of self-discovery and emotional dredge work, attempting to wrest some control over what's controllable.

It's down those lonely, almost mystical paths where all the good stuff happens. When a ghostlike vision of Duncan's biological mother appears one night out his window, he knows instantly what it means: He needs to find her. Zoe experiences out-of-body "hovering" moments as a way to distance herself from the crime and some unsettling discoveries about her parents' not-so-perfect marriage. And, for reasons she can't explain, Zoe wanders crowded streets looking for a man who smiled at her. Matthew, the only one directly focused on the actual crime, launches a secret investigation with the victim's brother, as though understanding the man and the motive behind the attack might magically make everything in his family normal again. In the end, of course, that's not always possible or necessarily desired. Half of all cases remain unsolved, the detective once told Matthew. It's as much of a consolation as it is a fact.

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