

## "IDEALIST WITH THE BIG BROKEN HEART"

a review by Barbara Bennett

Mark Powell. *Lioness: A Novel*. West Virginia University Press, 2022.

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OPPOSITE The Eastern cougar, now considered by the US Fish and Wildlife Service an extinct species in North Carolina

How far would you go in defense of your beliefs? Would you write a letter? Protest? March? And what if your child were a victim of a betrayal of that belief? Would you seek retribution? Break the law? Start a fire? Set off a bomb?

Mark Powell's newest novel, *Lioness*, asks these powerful questions and more. The two main characters, Mara and David, have always been environmentally conscious, but Mara is the "idealist with the big broken heart" (7) when their nine-year-old son Daniel dies of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. David is a journalist and struggling playwright who works on a story about the RAIN! water-bottling plant in southwest Virginia, where they live. The water is officially found to be pure, so David ends his research and brings home gallons of water, which is drunk by the family. Much later, David finds evidence that the company had falsified documents and the water is full of dioxins. When Mara finds out, nine months after Daniel dies, she leaves her husband, builds a bomb, and blows up the bottling plant. Whether Mara has survived the blast is unclear from the beginning. Powell holds that information close to the vest.

All of this is told in the first eleven pages, the first eight showing Mara living in the wilds of Florida with a young boy. Is this real? Did Mara survive and escape? Who is the boy? It's a long road to find out as David tries to reconstruct the past to figure out how he got where he is. But is it the truth? He claims that "[w]hat you have to do is construct an alternate life. Your life, but not quite" (11). Is that what he's doing, or is he telling

a story to help him cope? Powell takes David deep into the past to find the answers – where there are answers. Many times Powell gives us conjecture, hope, and plain fabrication.

As young adults, Mara and David believe that "everything's mixed up these days" (5), and the "country was dying, the entire planet. . . . The world being not nearly as hard to take apart as put together" (286). They are frustrated that protesting in the streets accomplishes nothing: "*They are still leveling mountains not a hundred miles from here. They're still poisoning our water, our soil*" (69). But what can turn two frustrated environmentalists into ecoterrorists? It turns out it's not *what* but *who*.

Enter Chris Bright, a man who has been fighting for ecological justice since he was a child. He felt a great affinity to animals, recognizing that it was the animals "that kept silent counsel, emerging and disappearing back into the world, and it was the animals, he realized, one day, who were dying" (96). His first ecoterrorist act, if it can be called that, was dismantling a deer stand he found in the woods – twice. As he grows into an adult, he becomes obsessed with "our dying planet. Climate change. Rising seas. The Sixth Extinction" (24). He commits several acts of ecoterrorism during his young life, some with success, some with failure.

Once Chris meets David and Mara, he begins to tutor them in his ecoterrorist philosophy. He tells them to stop wasting time and act rather than complain. Chris seduces both David and Mara, in every way conceivable, but it is Mara who becomes the

true believer. The couple live with him on his farm in a kind of environmental paradise, talking and drinking and making plans that they never seem to carry out. Finally, Mara asks, "What if we did something?" (159), and she and Chris make a plan to free the caged and mistreated wild animals in a roadside zoo. David is not ready for this kind of action and leaves for home. When the plan ultimately fails miserably, it puts a hold on Mara's fervor until years later when she is back with David, and their son dies.

It is at the roadside zoo that Mara has a close encounter with the animal in the title of the novel, a mountain lioness. As Mara peels back the fence to free the lioness, she finds herself "looking in at the golden eyes of the mountain lion" (217). It is a seminal moment for Mara because throughout the novel, she has been connected to this endangered animal. Powell has used the lioness as a symbol for all the destruction people are causing to the planet, which is now slowly dying. But the lioness is also a symbol for Mara, who continues to fight despite knowing it is a lost cause. We see – or sense – mountain lions throughout the novel. In the first chapter, Mara in Florida finds a dead and gutted deer on her porch and knows the kill was done by a lion. She is told by the Fish and Wildlife officer that the cat "represents one thirty-seventh of the remaining population" (7). Like Mara, the lioness may be dead soon – may already be dead. And like the lioness, Mara is a hunted being. The lioness shows up many times in the book: at the North Carolina home of Mara and David, in an

encounter with Chris when he is a child, as a stuffed relic of the past. In all cases, the lioness is ephemeral, spiritual, and a reminder of the damage we are doing to the planet.

The novel is a manifesto of the people who still care, who still want to turn things around before it is too late. The book is harsh in its depiction of Americans. In a tense conversation between David and the wife of the CEO of RAIN!, the woman surprises David with her opinion: "My theory is that you become American not by birth but by dint of will, by your rapacity, by your willingness to eat the world because why else were you put here? You are American. You are entitled" (303). Bad things keep happening, and Powell suggests that no one responsible ever pays for their sins, especially those with money and power, like the wife of the CEO.

Powell's descriptions of place are quite lyrical. He obviously knows the landscape he gives us in western North Carolina and southern Virginia. He has a way of taking the readers right to the spot and immersing us in the culture, landscape, and people.

He writes about difficult things in a beautiful way, reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy, who wrote violence with exquisite prose. Powell's love for his native turf comes through tangibly. He is the author of six previous novels, which have planted him deeply within the Appalachian literature tradition. His eighth novel, he claims, is a response to the 2016 presidential election. It is also set in the mountains.

With *Lioness*, he attempts to remind us of the damage we all do just by living the selfish American lifestyle. It's not an optimistic novel, more of a cautionary tale. In his previous novels, Powell has dealt with the loss of innocence in America and the loneliness and isolation of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While he dealt with the environment in his novel *The Dark Corner* (2012), he has never delved quite so deeply into the ecological disaster we have created on the planet. *Lioness* offers little hope, and in the end we are left with David's dark words: "Everything you have loved, everything you have known – it cannot, it will not last" (314). ■



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