

UNTANGLING THE STRINGS

a review by
Sharon E. Colley

Heather Newton.
The Puppeteer's Daughters:
A Novel. Keylight Books, 2022.

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HEATHER NEWTON is a practicing attorney and teaches creative writing. Her novel *Under the Mercy Trees* (HarperCollins, 2011) won the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award. Her short story collection, *McMullen Circle* (Regal House Publishing, 2022; reviewed in *NCLR Online* Fall 2022), was a finalist for both the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award and the W.S. Porter Prize. *The Puppeteer's Daughters* won the North Carolina Indie Author Project award for adult fiction and was a finalist for the Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award.

Do not let the title, *The Puppeteer's Daughters*, put you off. While it reflects the trend of books named after a female's relationship with a male (like *The Time Traveler's Wife* [2003] and *The Moonshiner's Daughter* [2019]), Heather Newton offers a fresh take on complicated family relationships and the nature of creativity.

The puppeteer in question is Walter Gray, a master artist who has reached Jim Henson levels of success. Like Henson, though, Gray realizes that his most artistic creations are not as lucrative as his educational shows. When an adult daughter pitches an idea for a new marionette show, Gray says, "Your tales are beautiful, Cora. Don't stop making them, but don't expect to sell them" (53).

The three titular daughters – Jane, Rosie, and Cora – are Gray's children from different women. Jane, the daughter of his first wife who was also a puppeteer, resents being the child of the lean years. Rosie, the daughter from a one-time fling, never feels completely accepted in the family. Cora, child of prosperity and a second, younger wife, embraces puppetry and becomes head of his company, Gray Steed Puppets, New York, living primarily for her work.

All three women are blindsided when, at their father's eightieth birthday party in Raleigh, NC, dementia-stricken Gray states that he has a fourth daughter. They find his will

along with a DNA test with the name ripped off. The will includes a codicil with odd and cruel conditions for inheritance, such as Rosie having to lose one hundred pounds to inherit. The DNA test gives credence to their father's strange utterance. Because of these finds, the women confront their views of themselves, each other, and their complicated relationships with their father.

Creativity plays a complex role in *The Puppeteer's Daughters*. Gray is a real artist, a puppeteer who apprenticed and then created his own puppets and shows. Yet, he finds his best art is not his most lucrative. Jane, his oldest, prides herself on being practical and anti-creative. Since she felt her father prioritized his puppets

over her, she has rejected creative activities despite her drawing talent. She rejects her son's present-day desire to quit college to tour with a band. Cora grew up working at Gray Steed Puppets, but now she focuses on the management side to the detriment of her creativity and personal life.

The juxtaposition of business, family, and creative obligations strain the characters. Ultimately, the most beautiful and original art in the novel is made for the creator, not the audience or profit. Cora recognizes the potential frustration in this "quest for perfection in art." She tells her lover, another artist, "I know artists who've quit when they couldn't achieve it. When I perform my puppets, I can never achieve the perfect

merge of language and movement, but getting as close as the laws of physics allow exhilarates me" (172).

As important as creativity is to the novel, family and belonging are essential, if often elusive. Gray's relationships with women do not end happily, and this shades his connections with his daughters. Each daughter belongs to a separate segment of his life, complicating their bonds. As adults, the half-sisters' relationships with each other, their mothers, and the men in their lives are colored by their perceptions of their celebrated and enigmatic father. Middle daughter Rosie, the child of a one-night stand, has always felt her father thought less of her than of her sisters. And the existence of a fourth sister might rewrite all three women's understanding of their place in the family and sense of self.

Point of view serves the novel admirably. The use of third person, limited omniscient, focusing primarily on the father and each daughter in turn, fills in sufficient background as well as adds perceptions colored by experience and emotion. One might wish for some further characterization or perspectives from the mothers, who mostly remain background players, but perhaps that would be a different book.

The Puppeteer's Daughters examines creativity, belonging, and connection in a fairy tale-inflected search for facts and truth. ■



COURTESY OF STEPHEN GOLDMAN

ABOVE Heather Newton talking with Tommy Hays at Malaprop's Bookstore in Asheville, NC, 2 Aug. 2022