

A MIX OF GRIEF AND MYSTERY

a review by Cody Messer

Matthew Fiander. *Ring in Your Ears*. Mint Hill Books, 2023.

CODY MESSER graduated from East Carolina University with a major in English and a minor in creative writing. During his program, he interned with NCLR.

MATTHEW FIANDER received his BA in English from Elon University and his MFA in creative writing, specifically fiction, from UNC Greensboro. He was an English instructor at High Point University and is currently working as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Wake Forest University. His fiction has been published in journals such as the *South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Reckon Review*.

OPPOSITE: Matthew Fiander participating in the “M Is for Murder” panel at Bookmarks, Winston-Salem, NC, 21 Feb. 2024

Matthew Fiander’s debut novel, *Ring in Your Ears*, is a slow, gut-wrenching tale of attempting to overcome grief and judgment, with a flair of melancholic ‘90s alternative rock thrown in for good measure. The book gets its name from that very music genre, coming from the lyrics of Buffalo Tom’s “Taillights Fade.” The book is filled with references to classic rock in this same vein, bands like Pearl Jam and Nirvana coming up often, for example. In some ways, the book provides its own soundtrack. At many points I found myself putting a song on as it played within the story, letting it run on repeat as I read. Music is integral to the feel of this work.

Fiander’s tale begins with Blue, the main character, writing a letter to her deceased sister, Christine, thirty years after the events surrounding Christine’s death. The narrative then transitions back to 1992, the year of her sister’s untimely passing, as Blue struggles through the immediate despair that comes from losing a loved one, while also dealing with family and friends coping in their own ways. In that aftermath and informed that her sister’s death was not an accident, Blue determines to find out who killed her.

Alongside Blue’s investigation into the foul play surrounding her sister’s demise, she has to deal with the struggles and drama that come with being an umpire for extremely competitive Little League baseball, where every parent seems to be inter-

mingled with the political and business woes of Blue’s wealthy father. With help from friends, like her sister’s ex-boyfriend Jacob, or her sister’s best friend, Kathleen, she is determined to uncover the mysteries behind Christine’s death.

The grander beats of the tale flow seamlessly one after the other, a cathartic payoff coming from each of the book’s branching narratives by its conclusion, all of which revolve around Blue and her interactions with the rest of the story’s complex and deeply flawed characters. We follow along as Blue’s mind is constantly wracked by thoughts of her sister, rationalizations of why her parents act in the manner they do, and angst for those in the town who she feels are less than upstanding. Her thoughts make this attitude and uncertainty clear: “Maybe it was just my world, this space in limbo, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever find my way out” (53).

Blue is almost always accompanied by one of the impressive supporting cast, be it her sister’s broody ex-boyfriend whose own struggles evolve alongside Blue’s, her sister’s best friend, or one of her father’s slimy business associates. Even Blue’s deceased sister, who only briefly appears alive in the novel, remains central as more is revealed about the choices that led her to that terrible fate. The story revels in the emotions of these characters, deconstructing their complex feelings as they attend sleazy parties and uncover messy secrets. The book wastes no time in establishing the town’s loud personas, diving deep into the low, sad tones of their lives, before a slowly building cre-

scendo of intrigue interrupts and intensifies their introspection.

The most powerful moments in the novel involve choice: characters constantly reference choice. This theme – what choices can be made, who can make them, and how choice can be taken away – crops up within every plotline of the novel; for example, in Kathleen’s constant struggle between meeting or escaping her father’s immense expectations, choosing whether or not she should break away from his theatrical pursuits in order to become her own person, and in the relationship between Blue’s parents’ troubles brought on by the father’s wealth and influence, which put him in situations where his ability to choose is uncomfortably stunted. The tension between Blue’s parents, includes an argument later in the story after Blue’s father has had a very public outburst concerning the death of Christine. Heated words are exchanged, eventually leading Blue’s mother to give him a poignant wakeup call: “It’s not your choice, even if you think it is” (139). Someone has the choice, and it is not Blue’s father. The most standout example of this discussion of choice comes just after Christine’s funeral as Blue skulks along the outside of her home to find space, alone: a businessman named Mark Hanlon shows up to talk with Blue. Though Hanlon is likely only there to foster a good connection with Blue’s father, in going outside to smoke weed, away from the dreary crowds of the day, he takes the chance to impart what he feels are some brutal facts of life. Blue asks, “[W]hat happens



COURTESY OF MATTHEW FIANDER

when your sister dies? What happens then? I couldn’t control that, so what now?” Mark gives his answer nonchalantly: “Someone did control that” (69). His succinct reply encapsulates much of what *Ring in Your Ears* is about: everything involves choices; sometimes these choices are just not yours.

Matthew Fiander’s cast of grieving characters dealing with the aftermath of an unforeseen death offers plenty of sadness and tragedy along the way but lands on a brilliant, soft, hopeful vision of the future. Back in the present, back in the beginning of the novel as Blue reminisces about the good times she had with her sister, she asks Christine why she does not look at the lyrics of the song she is listening to, Buffalo Tom’s “That Weathered Man in the Sunken Chair.” In her answer, Christine reveals the crux of her character, and the novel: “[E]very time I hear it, I think something different. I see a different face, hear a different name. For that guy, for Jesus, for the voice singing. I wait for the song to tell me something new” (viii–ix). ■