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The Ghosts That Haunt Me

A magical, tragic tale of three outcast sisters in Hawaii.

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BEHOLD THE MANY

A Novel

By *Lois-Ann Yamanaka*

Farrar Straus Giroux. 341 pp. \$24

There is a traditional saying in Hawaii, the birthplace of the Japanese-American writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka: "In the language is life, in the language is death." Practical meaning: One's words can heal, one's words can hurt. In Yamanaka's vivid novel *Behold the Many*, her words do both, breaking our hearts and nursing them back to wholeness with the balm of her prose.

Yamanaka's tortured characters take us through poles of illness and health, damnation and redemption, curses and prayers, and life and death in a dazzling display of language that reveals the author's roots as a poet. Her text sings with myriad cultural voices that have claimed their place in Hawaii's immigrant history -- from European missionaries to Portuguese, Chinese and Japanese laborers, all rendered with their dialects and cultural idiosyncrasies. The result is a book as lush and complex as its setting.

Yamanaka juxtaposes beauty and pain, proclaiming her thematic intentions from the novel's opening page, when she describes a woman's body as a lovely countryside: "The valley is a woman lying on her back, legs spread wide, her geography wet by a constant rain. Waterfalls wash the days and nights of winter storms into the river that empties into the froth of the sea. . . . The rain glistens on maiden fern, the wind rustling the laua'e, the palapalai touching her there where it is always wet and seamy." Then, she subverts her gentle description to reveal that the woman is actually a violently murdered corpse.

Behold the Many can be challenging, both emotionally and technically, given its time-shifts and dialects, but the challenges are in service to a novel with impressive scope and emotional power. The protagonist, Anah, is the child of a Portuguese laborer and an emotionally crippled Japanese mother. Anah's suffering begins in childhood and abates only in precious moments as she travels to adulthood. Yamanaka's dogged attention to details -- particularly shards of beauty in the midst of terrible events -- makes this novel wondrous and life-affirming even as it guides readers through the difficult territories of sickness, loss and death.

In 1913, Anah is helpless to prevent her parents from sending her ill younger sister to St. Joseph's orphanage in the Kalihi Valley after tuberculosis sweeps through the laborers' camp. A second sister grows sick and is also sent away, and finally Anah herself contracts the bloody cough. At St. Joseph's, Anah witnesses her sisters' deaths -- and then is cursed and attacked by their restless, heartbroken ghosts and those of the other children who can't find their way home to God. At the same time, despite the religious teachings of the nuns who run the orphanage, Anah faces derision and abuse from her

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purported benefactors.

Behold the Many is partially a ghost fantasy, but its worst horrors are entrenched in the world of the living. Anah's father, Dai, is a child molester who keeps his wife captive and refuses to allow his heartbroken son, Charles, to visit his sisters after they are sent away. (Even death cannot quell Dai's evil; he continues to molest his children's ghosts from the grave.) Anah's Portuguese grandmother loathes the Japanese features Anah inherited from her mother. Anah's mother is weak and, ultimately, abandons her children.

Given the ghost themes, it's tempting to draw comparisons to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where supernatural manifestations are a metaphor for the intergenerational horrors inflicted by American slavery. In *Behold the Many*, although the characters are not native Hawaiians, the angry child ghosts are orphaned in the netherworld against the backdrop of Hawaii's colonial past. Where is "home" in a new land where your destiny is controlled by others? As the loathsome Auntie Tova rants, "It is not like the government hasn't been trying to Americanize you Orientals. . . . When will Governor Farrington realize that educating them will not make a lick of difference."

Yamanaka's mastery of dialect, in particular, infuses the pages with cultural resonance. The novel reads as if it is meant to be heard aloud, from the playful scoldings of the kindly Chinese cook, Auntie Chong Sum, to Anah's own shifts between pidgin and Portuguese. Context and repetition of phrases demystify her characters' pidgin -- "keiki" for "children," "haole" for "whites," "bumbye" for "eventually," "wahine" for "woman" -- so readers are carried in Yamanaka's linguistic currents.

Love and light are also here. At the orphanage, Sister Mary Deborah is as kind as Sister Bernadine is cruel. Ezroh, a Portuguese boy who woos Anah, seems so angelic that he almost isn't three-dimensional at times. Anah names her first daughter Hosana, a praise of God. Ultimately, even the senseless murder mentioned on the book's opening page enables a vital act of redemption.

Anah suffers many devastating words and events in the course of this novel. But in *Behold the Many*, one of our nation's most dynamic literary stylists forces us to stare wide-eyed into the pain until we can see the healing beauty hidden in its folds. ·

Tananarive Due, an American Book Award recipient, recently published her sixth novel, "Joplin's Ghost."

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