

BOOK REVIEWS

Leslie Vryenhoek. *Ledger of the Open Hand*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2015. ISBN 978-1-55081-604-4

Although Leslie Vryenhoek's first novel, *Ledger of the Open Hand*, does not contain a grand adventure, the author's eloquent, poised writing style infuses quotidian situations and problems with a compelling grace. It draws the reader into the life of its protagonist, Meriel-Claire Elgin, and her struggles with female friendship, her difficult relationship with her mother, and her obsession with her finances. As in her collection of short stories, *Scrabble Lessons* (2009), Vryenhoek focuses on ordinary life and on characters who break with confining lifestyles. Most impressive is Vryenhoek's use of two main motifs, a financial motif and a book motif, to explore the major changes that Meriel-Claire faces. Both finances and literature act as major forces in the lives of her characters and as primary points of interaction between them. Moreover, in a wonderful series of reversals, she ultimately has the book motif help Meriel-Claire overcome the effects of the financial motif. It is this poignant juxtaposition of literary motifs that keeps the reader engrossed in Meriel-Claire's story until its conclusion.

Vryenhoek makes the dominance of financial concerns in her protagonist's life exceedingly clear by having the financial motif appear at every turn. The novel's structure references the financial world: the word "ledger" appears in the title, and the titles of its three main sections are I. Assets and Liabilities, II. Restricted Funds, and III. Balance Sheets. Meriel-Claire's compulsive frugality permeates major aspects of her life, such as her profession as a debt counsellor, and minor details, such as her attempt to save a piece of wrapping

paper for a second use (198). Vryenhoek even gives her protagonist's obsession with avoiding debt a psychological backstory. In a flashback scene, the narrator recalls throwing away all of the coins in a small purse, "probably the sum total of [her] saved allowance" (20), in an attempt to land a coin into the cupped hands of a mermaid statue in a fountain. When she attempts to retrieve her money from the fountain's basin (she has counted all the coins and knows exactly how many are hers), her mother prevents her from doing so, declaring, "You can't have them back. . . . You threw them away" (22). From that moment on, Meriel-Claire never throws away money again, instead exhibiting extreme caution with her personal funds.

The mermaid scene is, in fact, filled with images that govern the novel; importantly, Vryenhoek has the mermaid statue and Daneen Turner (later Daneen Decario) mirror each other, providing a link between this early scene and the theme of female friendship. The mermaid statue and Daneen are both glamorous figures. Meriel-Claire describes the mermaid statue as "arcing over [the fountain] basin, her carved hair a cascade, her tail curled," and having an expression that, "up close, said she had a wonderful secret" (20). When the protagonist first sees her roommate on arriving at their shared dorm room, she initially perceives only "the mass of curls, her long neck," and her posture "perfect at her desk" (12). Furthermore, right before the flashback scene, Meriel-Claire states, "A handful of weeks into our association, I already regarded Daneen as a deep pool, one that reflected back all the things I wasn't" (19). In the order of the novel, the "deep pool" of Daneen foreshadows the image of the fountain's basin, the pool before which Meriel-Claire fails to be responsible with her money and has a confrontational experience with her mother. However, in the order of Meriel-Claire's life history, the pool of the fountain prefigures the pool of Daneen, and the conflicts that arose at the fountain foreshadow the conflicts that arise from, or at least play out within, the basin of their friendship.

When it comes to female friendships, Vryenhoek's novel, in contrast to many texts that explore this theme, does not offer an idealistic

picture, as Meriel-Claire and Daneen do not always treat each other well, and overall, they seem ambivalent about each other. Vryenhoek slips an image of idealized female friendship into the novel, drawing attention to the contrast between such depictions and her portrayal of her characters. The protagonist, while looking at a women's magazine in a waiting room, spots an article about female friendships, and accompanying it is "a photograph of four women leaning in at a café table, laughing, glasses of red wine glittering in front of them and their teeth uniformly white" (166). This image most directly recalls the four friends at the centre of *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), but also echoes images of idealized female friendships more generally, such as the depictions found in Ann Brashares's young adult series *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2001–2011), or even in the Spice Girls' famous song "Wannabe" (1996). Unlike these friends who care deeply about one another and consistently share in one another's lives, Daneen and Meriel-Claire go long periods of time without speaking to each other and exclude each other from important events. For instance, Meriel-Claire chooses to take her brother Gord off life support and donate his organs *before* she calls Daneen, making the decision alone (123), and Daneen does not invite Meriel-Claire to her wedding, instead sending only a postcard after it has happened (134). Thus, instead of offering her audience an ideal, Vryenhoek offers a raw portrait of a flawed friendship.

In her depiction of the tense relationship between the protagonist and her mother, Doris Elgin, Vryenhoek once again avoids an idealistic relationship, and she again delves into an area of concern shared by other recent media, this time more in sympathy with the other texts. There are a number of popular texts that, like *Ledger*, depict mothers and daughters who have tense relationships and struggle to understand one another: examples include the romantic comedy *Because I Said So* (2007), the comedy/drama *Georgia Rule* (2007), the animated *Brave* (2012), and Brashares's novel *The Second Summer of the Sisterhood* (2003). As is clear from the fountain scene, friction has existed between Doris and Meriel-Claire since the latter was a small child.

Doris constantly picks on her daughter. From her patronizing “first impressions” speech at the novel’s opening (9), to criticizing her daughter’s “big appetite” (24), to disapproving of Meriel-Claire’s enjoyment of science fiction novels (26), Doris appears constantly displeased with her daughter. Vryenhoek even intertwines the two problematic relationships that the protagonist has with other women, as Daneen usurps Meriel-Claire’s role in Doris’s life. During the summer in which Daneen stays with the Elgins, Doris starts referring to Daneen as her Other Daughter, and Meriel-Claire notes that “[t]hey had matching tans from lawn-chair afternoons spent passing novels back and forth, talking them over” (50). This moment shows just how far apart Doris and Meriel-Claire have drifted, as well as suggesting the problematic nature of the latter’s friendship with Daneen.

Like the financial motif, Vryenhoek enmeshes the book motif into the narrative; however, this motif grows in prominence over the course of the story, slowly working to invert the governing fountain scene. Vryenhoek cleverly plays her two major motifs off against each other, first through the contrast between Daneen and Meriel-Claire, then through a series of payments the protagonist makes, which change her life. Books enter the narrative via Daneen, an avid reader (26) and, later, a successful writer, a quite different figure from the numerically-minded Meriel-Claire.

Addie Sullivan, one of Meriel-Claire’s clients, who, significantly, sells books in front of the fountain in the park, acts as a foil for both Daneen and her mirror image, the mermaid: Addie’s “ugly” appearance (216) contrasts with their beauty, her poverty with their riches, and her forthcoming, genuine nature with their cool secretiveness. Addie alters the direction of the protagonist’s life, for Meriel-Claire feels compassion for her and writes her a personal cheque to help her, the first in a series of three payments that transform the protagonist’s relationships and her lifestyle. In a well-conceived reversal of the bad luck and irresponsibility of the fountain scene, Meriel-Claire discovers her mother’s gambling debts, and she helps her pay them off, the seed of a new start for her and Doris. Finally, Meriel-Claire discovers that

Daneen plagiarized her third novel, *Desperate and Bliss*: a woman named Joanne Braun had approached Daneen with her notes for the novel she was writing about her family history, and Daneen proceeded to steal the story. As compensation, Meriel-Claire pays Joanne \$18,000 (310). Simultaneously, she pays off a debt she owes Daneen from 15 years earlier (62, 310), and, at last, albeit indirectly, she confronts her friend about her first novel, *Hidden Bargains*, a sensational fictionalization of the Elgins (134–35). These actions end the now-toxic friendship. The protagonist then begins anew by financing Addie's bookstore, and the novel ends brilliantly, with Addie teaching her new friend to do a "mermaid's dive" (a technique for throwing stones into rivers). The image of them tossing (monetarily worthless) rocks into the river, the inverse of Meriel-Claire's memory at the fountain, shows that she is now triumphing over the complications that emerged at this earlier moment.

Vryenhoek's novel is beautifully written, making excellent use of motifs to develop the characters and the plot, and examining popular themes in an original, intelligent, and touching manner. *Ledger of the Open Hand* is relevant to the contemporary world, and it is a wonderful contribution to the literature dealing with female friendships and mother-daughter relationships. The novel left me wanting to read more of Vryenhoek's work, and so I happily await her next release.

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