

Of squids and circles

Belinda's Rings, Corinna Chong, NeWest Press, 2013.

The stories of half-Chinese teenager Grace and her white mother Belinda are at once distinct and inseparable in Corinna Chong's first novel, *Belinda's Rings*. Written in a narrative that splits Grace's voice with an account of Belinda's travels in pursuit of a personal passion, the book expounds the often contradictory domestic tales with equal importance. Chong's novel touches on an insurmountable generational gap: it delves into the incompatibilities of a daughter's hypocritical fifteen-year-old world view, where her older sister is always vain and pathetic and she can roll her eyes at her parents' attempts to be "cool," and a mother's naive exploits and habit of unloading adult responsibilities onto her children. But *Belinda's Rings* also contributes to an area in need of development in Canadian literature, the space for hybrid ethnicities. Embedded within the family drama, Chong explores the complexities of racial identification — how Grace interchangeably struggles and finds freedom in the fact that she will always look different than her mother.

The plot follows two separate arcs. Belinda is a divorcée, a wife, and a mother of three, but she is also an amateur field researcher, engrossed by elusive crop circle formations. The catalyst for familial commotion lies in her departure for Salisbury, England, only a stone's throw from the village where Belinda grew up, but a world away from Calgary, Canada, where she has left behind her two teenage daughters, six-year-old son, and emotionally unstable husband. Grace's perspective shows how things start to unravel in her absence, indicated, in part, by the mess in the house:

There was hair all over the bathroom floor and in the sink and a huge skid-mark in the toilet. The dining room was still a disaster zone from Jess's collage project that had been due three days before, Chatelaine magazines splayed open on the table with their gutted pages furling out [. . .] There were pots of dried-up mac 'n' cheese stacked on the kitchen counter along with a couple of days' worth of dirty plates and cutlery left there 'cause no one had wanted to empty the dishwasher.

Grace is left feeling like she must step up and fill her mother's shoes, but she has other things on her mind, namely a fascination with creatures of the ocean's depths and an aspiration to become a marine biologist.

Belinda's and Grace's separate interests stock the novel with marvellous displays of the florid patterns in crop circles and the unnerving qualities of certain sea species. Chong uses her themes to their full metaphorical potential. Grace's first-person narration, though consistently true to her fifteen years, is

philosophically inclined and makes imaginative parallels between her social ecosystem and the one she studies:

Sometimes I wonder if people are meant to stay where they belong. I've heard people talk about feeling culture shock when they go to a different country. It makes me think of this story I read a while ago about a bunch of foreign jellyfish — mauve stingers, in fact — freaking out and attacking a salmon farm in Ireland.

In the same way that Grace draws connections between her world and another, Belinda is engrossed by the science of fractals and repeated patterns; she believes (and often resists the belief) that everything in life is "part of the cosmic design." Manoeuvring the rich imagery of crop circles, Chong gives Belinda and Grace a limited agency — they are subject to patterns, and yet constantly elude (or misunderstand) them. Grace wonders, when imagining her aunt Prim as an older version of her mother and her cousin Sebastian as a version of her brother Sebastian, if there's another copy of herself "out there somewhere," but this thought is immediately followed by Grace's amendment, "there wasn't anyone else quite like me in the world." Belinda also rejects the formula of her behaviour, the repetition of her marriages: "it was natural to want to resist seeing herself as symmetrical and invariable. The flawless uniformity of crop circles was proof of their unearthliness. They were too perfect for humans to conjure. To prescribe a pattern for herself was, in a sense, dehumanizing." It is in the margin of supposed randomness and coincidence that Grace and Belinda pursue their dreams, blissfully ignorant of the possibility of a larger pattern at work.

Alongside the book's almost fantastical wonder of science is a discourse of race in family relationships that rings shockingly true. In the novel's opening scene, a flashback of a trip to the grocery store, Grace remembers how a woman mistook her for a stranger not belonging to the family because of her dissimilar appearance. When Grace notes "how easy it was to play the part," the formerly light and comical memory takes on significant weight. Though at a young age she and her sister Jessica think nothing of receiving monetary handouts from strangers who wrongly identify them as adopted Vietnamese children, the girls' acute sense of racial difference is poignantly revealed in their growing adolescent self-awareness. Grace teases Jessica for the "pathetic" sentiment she finds in her diary: "*Mummy has green eyes and blonde hair and I don't know why I didn't get green eyes and blonde hair. It's not fair. Mummy is so pretty and everyone says so*" — but Grace inevitably feels the same shortcomings. The book's racial tension is palpable, though it oscillates surprisingly and wonderfully with love, in the same way that Grace feels alternately included and excluded from her family.

Chong's prose flows so seamlessly that it is easy to overlook the novel's

careful structure of interweaving stories. My favourite aspect of this book is its completions of open-ended memories or flashbacks, chapters later, by the second protagonist — how Belinda remarks on Grace’s longing to fit in when the teenage “Gray” could never admit to such insecurities, or how Grace recognizes her brother’s specific needs while Belinda remains naively ignorant. Family discussions are later flavoured by the revealing of a dispute or the unveiling of a secret. Grace’s character is real, her voice is fresh and colourful, and she proves to be a regular teenager and charmingly unreliable narrator. Belinda, though perhaps not quite as convincing as Grace, is drawn realistically as a woman with desires that reach beyond her role as a wife and mother. A novel subtly charged with emotion, *Belinda’s Rings* is unmistakably a noteworthy read.

— Rebecca Geleyn
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