

where we have to go

compelling new book by toronto author lauren kirshner

Lauren Kirshner's recent first novel, *Where We Have to Go*, follows the main character Lucy as she grows up in Toronto during the nineties. Published by McClelland and Stewart, the novel takes a close look at Lucy's family dynamics, and the tense relationship between her parents as a result of her father's infidelity.

Lucy Bloom first appears in the novel at age eleven, and grows into young adulthood by the end of the novel. Kirshner writes a convincing voice for Lucy from the perceptive eleven year-old, to the self-conscious teenager, and into a strong young adult. She's a little weird, but identifiable and naïve. Lucy has a mild obsession with cats and pretends that her own cat has a job, as well as a minor obsession with *ALF*. But her earnest growth into adolescence is convincingly painful at times as she moves between school and home, where the tension between her parents holds Lucy suspended between them.

The other characters are written with a lot of depth and care. The book examines how people try to find what makes them happy. Lucy's father tried to find it in an affair and as a result her mom tries to leave, but that doesn't make her happy either. They exist in the quiet painful family home, where her father walks on eggshells and it's clear that her mom is disappointed in the choices she has made. Lucy is painfully aware of everything that is going on, but as a child she is also misinformed. She oscillates between trying to fix things at home herself and trying to run away.

Lucy's parents, Frank and Joy, are written with complexity and depth in a delicate relationship balanced by tension and silence. Both unsatisfied and searching for a greater happiness, they attempt to latch on to other people and take Lucy with them. Their relationship fluctuates through various stages as the novel progresses, and it is an intimate and considerate depiction.

Lucy's best friend Erin is written with the colour and vivaciousness that it is clear Lucy desires for herself. Erin is impulsive and scattered, and her and Lucy's lives quickly become intertwined as they make plans with one another. Erin provides a source of support and a way for Lucy to be more fearless and live less quietly. Erin tells Lucy: "We're too young to have plan B. I don't even know what my plan A is."

The only part of the novel that I take issue with is the disappearance of Lucy's eating disorder. Up until this point Lucy's compulsive counting, intense self criticism and role as the only child caught in-between parental conflict set the stage for her own

struggle as she internalizes this guilt and pressure. After she seeks treatment at a house for "the criminally thin," she returns home and the eating disorder seemingly vanishes from the narrative altogether. Even though her parent's relationship continues to fluctuate throughout the novel, Lucy's weight and food issues have vanished, and given the intimate connection between them I am uncertain as to how realistic this omission is.

Kirshner said "I don't want to say that an eating disorder is like a light switch and one day you have it and one day you don't, I don't think that's true from all the research I've done. But I did want to show that Lucy is finally taking charge of her life. So much of her life before had been dominated by the wishes and the problems of her parents. I think this is the moment in the book where she is really deciding what in her life is most important. She chooses her friends and she chooses dependence rather than the cage that her family and her eating disorder has put her into. While I think it might seem like it's disappeared, because it's a first person narration, Lucy's kind of steering the ship at that point. For me as the author I felt like Lucy really wants to focus on everything *but* the eating disorder, and she wants to focus on freedom and the eating disorder was the opposite of that."

As she grows older Lucy demonstrates the stupid idealism of being young and imagining your perfect adult life, being critical of your parents and imagining that you'll do it better. She struggles internally with self criticism and insecurity all the same, and tries to work through her feelings about herself and family to locate her own independence. Lucy continues to have thoughtful and introspective ideas as she develops into young womanhood, especially in regards to the personality and character traits that make up individuals and bind relationships together. She reflects "People are like switches. When they're on, the currents of life are flowing through them: they're funny, they sing you a bar of a stupid song without caring how they sound, and they talk before they have a chance to think about what they want to say. I was like that with Erin. Dad used to be like that with me, in his own blunt way. Now he shut everyone down. Now he's shut himself down."

It is exciting to read a story that revolves around familiar places, like Bathurst Street and Lee's Palace.

Where We Have to Go is an entertaining read with a lovable character who is easy to relate to.

• Grace Evans



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A Novel

LAUREN KIRSHNER