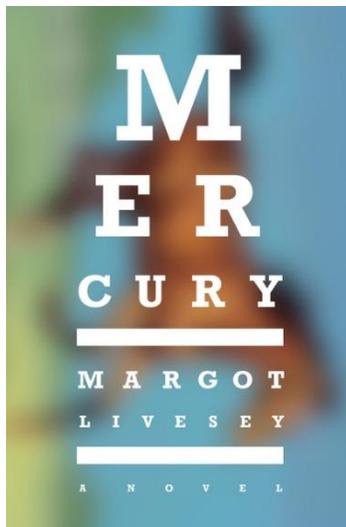


'Mercury' is the story of a beautiful horse, and the woman loves him

In Margot Livesey's new novel, clarity of vision proves elusive, even with corrective lenses.

By Katherine A. Powers, *The Barnes & Noble Review* November 10, 2016



Mercury is Margot Livesey's eighth novel, and just like the previous seven, it is completely different from its predecessors. Her books have been peopled by a most variegated lot, among them an evil child, a lunatic, a blackmailer, an amnesiac, a control freak, a couple of ghosts, and, last time, in "The Flight of Gemma Hardy," a mid-20th-century version of "Jane Eyre." Now we find ourselves sucked deep into the lives of an optometrist, his equestrian wife, and their two children.

Scottish-born Donald Stevenson was brought to this country by his parents when he was 10, a temporary move that turned permanent. It was wrenching, above all because it separated him from his best friend, a boy he finally stopped writing to when he had to admit that he wasn't coming back. Throwing up barriers, we discover, is Donald's way of dealing with painful emotions. Now he's a grown man but once again in a state of shuttered bereavement, this time for his father, who died fairly recently from Parkinson's disease. We learn that Donald has, in fact, shaped the last several years of his and his family's life around his father's decline. He moved them all to be closer to his parents, gave up the medical discipline of ophthalmology for optometry with its shorter, more predictable hours, and visited the increasingly disabled man as often as possible.

On the distaff side of this tale is Donald's wife, Viv, who left a well-paying job in mutual funds to run a stable with her friend Claudia, a business she loves though it pays peanuts. Like her husband, she, too, has a devastating loss in her past, that of an adored horse who had to be put down as a result of her own mistakes in training. Now she has fallen in love with Mercury, a beautiful thoroughbred boarded at the stable and owned by a woman called Hilary. Hilary, not a horsewoman herself, is glad to have someone exercise the creature, which has come to her via an inheritance with its own tragic details.

Other crucial characters spin off their own little side plots, all of which converge on the fateful main one. Claudia, Viv's partner, is involved with a married man; Hilary, the owner of Mercury, falls in love with Jack, one of Donald's former patients, now blind. There is also a young stable girl, Charlie, who has become as smitten with Mercury as Viv has – and that cannot bode well.

While Donald flounders in grief, Viv becomes increasingly intoxicated by the dream that she can redo the past and train a champion: “I was going to ride him to victory ... I was going to fulfill the promise of my second life.” She neglects her family, throws around money they cannot afford to spend, and becomes paranoid that harm will come to the horse. Those fears grow as she detects that someone has visited the horse in the night. Still, Viv loses sight of what should be the most disquieting fact of all: Mercury does not actually belong to her. Step by step, Livesey brilliantly assembles a truly painful and frightening picture of delusion. A sequence of fateful acts follow, leading to tragedy and a terrible moral conundrum.

Most of the novel is presented as an account written by Donald after the fact, but as he is the most judicious of narrators, he includes a long letter from Viv. This allows her to offer her version, one that fills in emotional detail – not Donald’s strong suit. His manner of narration has a 19th-century Caledonian air, one marked by a knell of dark foreboding. He points to incidents that would turn out to have dire repercussions and to the signs he missed of coming disaster. He was blind, he sees now, to what was going on around him. It is a failing made almost ludicrous considering that his prize possession, his totem, really, is a model of an eye, 12 times the size of an actual one. “[W]e think we see with our eyes,” he explains to a patient, “but really we see with our brains.”

In addition to sight – or lack of it – the novel’s other governing motif is Mercury, the implications and connotations of which are thoroughly unpacked by the diligent Donald – he’s that kind of guy and Livesey is that kind of writer. There’s Mercury the horse, the swiftest of the gods and their messenger, and mercury the element that, as Donald reminds himself, is a poison that causes death and – yes – blindness. And there is Mercury, the planet and part of a system of bodies, each affecting the others. Donald gets all this going, trying to figure out, in his weirdly analytic way, how to understand his life and that of those around him.

These strands of allusion and connotation – some as subtle as gossamer, some as conspicuous as a hawser – contribute to the novel’s deftly manipulated tension. I cannot in good conscience reveal more of the plot. I came to this story in a state of innocence, and I feel that its terrific power depended in great part on the gradual unfolding of unlooked-for events. So, I leave this pleasure for you to experience in its unadulterated form.

Katherine A. Powers received the 2013 Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing from the National Book Critics Circle. She is the editor of "Suitable Accommodations: An Autobiographical Story of Family Life: The Letters of J. F. Powers, 1942–1963." Her email address is kapow3@gmail.com.