

FICTION

Re-imagining Christopher Columbus

BY DENNIS LYTHGOE

The setting for Canadian writer Thomas Trofimuk's inventive, charming new novel, *Waiting for Columbus*, is a mental institution in Sevilla, Spain. There, a 21st-century inmate persuasively argues that he is actually the legendary 15th-century navigator Christopher Columbus.

Although medical personnel initially suspect his is a stereotypically disturbed mind—like that of an inmate who calls herself Pope Cecilia, purporting to be the first woman Pope—they are startled by his detailed and colorful knowledge of his subject, time period and descriptions of his ostensibly first-person experiences.

Columbus, as they dutifully call him, speaks with an incisive vocabulary and tells 15th-century stories with uncanny credibility. At the same time, he also has a disjointed, perhaps playful habit of interspersing his stories with contemporary elements that do not fit—like telephones in the time of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Nurse Consuela, a beautiful and witty woman, listens intently to his stories and writes them down for psychiatrists. In spite of Columbus' sometimes destructive behavior, she finds herself increasingly attracted to the intellectual, cultured side of this mysterious man and patient.

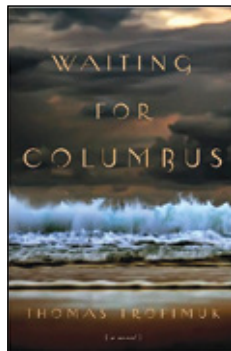
Soon, however, Consuela becomes frustrated with Columbus; his salacious stories of romantic encounters with women exotically named Beatriz, Selena—and even Queen Isabella—make her inexplicably jealous. And the more she comes to know about Columbus, the more questions she has about the nature of his true identity.

Dr. Fuentes, the medical chief of the facility, loses interest in Columbus, but Dr. Balderas, who replaces him, is anxious to unravel his personal story. His chats with Columbus create rapport, just as Consuela's have—and together Balderas and Consuela begin to unravel the nature of Columbus' past.

The author is inventive in structuring a multifaceted story that never loses its vitality. His literary gifts allow him to portray each character with depth, while at the same time creating a rising sense of suspense at the possibility of uncovering Columbus' true identity.

While the name Thomas Trofimuk is hardly one that trips easily off the tongue, we can only hope that this promising novelist will continue to create fascinating fiction. ♥

Dennis Lythgoe is a writer who has lived in Boston and Salt Lake City.



Waiting for Columbus

By Thomas Trofimuk
Doubleday
\$26, 336 pages
ISBN 9780385529136
Also available on audio

FICTION

Oates' chilling small-town mystery

BY NANCY FONTAINE

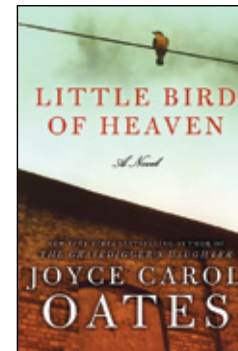
Murder and small-town life mix in Joyce Carol Oates' latest literary offering, *Little Bird of Heaven*. Through the eyes of young Krista Diehl, we are transported to the fictional town of Sparta in upstate New York, where life is hard and few ever leave. Krista is but 11 years old when her childhood begins to splinter. Her father, Eddy, has been having an affair with Zoe Kruller, known for her job at Honeystone's Dairy as well as her nighttime singing gigs with a local band. Zoe moves out of the house she shares with her husband Delray and son Aaron, only to turn up murdered not long afterward. Aaron discovers Zoe's body, and Delray and Eddy are detained as possible suspects. Although neither man is charged with the crime, neither escapes unscathed: Eddy loses his family when his wife kicks him out; Delray nearly loses his business and his drinking spirals out of control.

Throughout the novel, the town of Sparta, with its uneducated, hard-living inhabitants and crumbling infrastructure, is more than just a backdrop. It ensnares its citizens—people in the town cannot free themselves from its grasp. Prosperous folks are not at the forefront here, yet class differences, particularly between the inhabitants of Sparta and the nearby reservation, are keenly observed.

In part one, Krista's life is vividly imagined. The narrative meanders through her recollections, delicately painting the picture of her family's disintegration while building toward an electrifying scene that caps off Krista's story. When the tale switches its focus to Aaron in part two of the novel, Oates' writing opens up while the story itself becomes more compact. The contrast between these two elements results in a shorter and sparser, but equally affecting, narrative.

Little Bird of Heaven is classic Oates. Its depiction of violence, families falling from grace and social class disparities, as well as its location, recall her 1996 bestseller, *We Were the Mulvaney*s. Fans of Oates will delight in this offering and newcomers to her work will receive a first-class introduction. ♥

Nancy Fontaine is a librarian and freelance writer in West Lebanon, New Hampshire.



Little Bird of Heaven

By Joyce Carol Oates
Ecco
\$25.99, 448 pages
ISBN 9780061829833

FICTION

Literature heals amid grief

BY CARLA JEAN WHITLEY

Ellie Lerner is devastated when her best friend Lucy is murdered while walking her eight-year-old daughter Sophie to school. Ellie immediately flies from America to London, helps Lucy's husband plan the funeral and tends to Sophie, her goddaughter who has fallen silent after witnessing her mother's brutal death.

As she copes with the loss of her best friend, Ellie attaches herself to Sophie, clinging to the child for purpose and meaning in the wake of her best friend's murder.

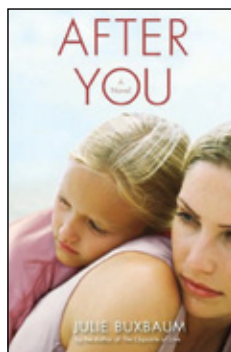
Ellie and Sophie find escape in literature, as they read a chapter of *The Secret Garden* each night before bed. Ellie feels about books the way some do about cooking: sharing them with others is an act of service and love. It's the act of reading that convinces Sophie to break nearly a week of silence.

But in the process, Ellie neglects her own marriage. There's already distance between her and Phillip, an emotional remoteness that began when their own child died in utero, and now Ellie adds physical distance to the equation.

Julie Buxbaum crafts a tale filled with the nuance of broken relationships, just as she did in her debut novel *The Opposite of Love*. And though her first novel was widely acclaimed, Buxbaum's writing has clearly matured. Her characters possess emotional depth that's evident from page one, and her storytelling is more streamlined and precise.

While *The Opposite of Love* danced on the edges of chick lit, *After You* steps toward literary fiction. It's a promising move for a young author who sidesteps the sophomore slump. ♥

Carla Jean Whitley writes from Birmingham, Alabama.



After You

By Julie Buxbaum
Dial Press
\$25, 352 pages
ISBN 9780385341240

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