

Carrie Snyder, *Girl Runner*. Toronto, Ontario: House of Anansi Press, 2014. Pp. 363. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Girl Runner opens daringly, like a sprinter released from the blocks and running recklessly toward the future. Except that the future is already over in the Prologue (it's not a prologue but an ancient woman's reverie), called a Love Song that's "not a love song" (1). It could be resigned acceptance — "my achievement is to have lived long enough to see my life vanish. Who will write my obituary?" (2) — except for the speaker's courageous refusal to dismiss what she has made of her life. Dropped deftly into this reflective beginning are brief allusions to the remains of that unconventional life ("scorched medals," "forgotten record book"), allusions that we don't understand until we have finished the novel and returned to a second reading.

And a second reading is highly recommended. If, like me, you read hastily the first time, in the grip of suspense, and then again to find out why you kept turning pages, then be assured that a second reading of *Girl Runner* is richer than the first. For the mystery at its heart, which clever readers will likely solve in the first reading, is not even the best part. The novel's daring reveals itself in other ways.

Most striking is the narrative voice: Aganetha Smart, 104 years old, winner of a gold medal in 1928, the first Olympics in which women were allowed to run. She is now "a bit deaf — though not so deaf as they think — and not-quite blind," (2) but she has not lost

her passion to understand everything that life has to offer: "There's no starting this race over again. And still I run. I run and I run, without rest, as if even now there is time and purpose and I will gain, at last — before my spool of silence unwinds — what I've yet to know." (3) Her journey toward what she has yet to know will take us through a lifetime's worth of ambition, unseemly in a woman of her time; more than enough illness, war, and betrayals and misunderstandings; and the tendentious issues of strong female friendships and self-determination in an age of misogynous discrimination. Without becoming strident or overtly political — Snyder's narrator remains realistic and pragmatic in the midst of defiance, romance, and unarguable necessity — Aggie Smart finds her own way, reckless yet ultimately self-contained, self-sufficient.

Her gift is to have recognized, very early, that she was meant to be a performance artist: "Motion comes lightly to me It can never be made in just the same way again. It vanishes the instant I've created it. How can I ever grow bored of it?" (42) Poised on the peak of a steep barn roof, having just done a handstand that frightened her family nigh to death, twelve-year-old Aggie concludes: "These performances are not life, as I see it. They exist outside of what is real and dreadful. They arrive given an opportunity. I am in control of them. I shape them . . . to give the audience pleasure, in order to show the world in its mirrored state, which is a state of perfect order, and the opposite of the world we're doomed to inhabit, dark with confusion and accident." (108-109)

Her voice controls the novel, whether reliving her past or registering the present. As was already clearly evident in *The Juliet Stories*, Snyder's gift is to hand over the story to an articulate, self-conscious narrator with an eye for details and a wry ability to speak truth with a reporter's detachment.

While such a narrative strategy runs the risk of leaving other characters thinly drawn, mere backdrop for the narrator's drama, in *Girl Runner*, they come to life through the sensitivity of Aggie's perceptions and her awareness of unspoken assumptions, particularly regarding women. Aggie has clearly been shaped by women of strong backbone, who are not afraid to challenge conventions. To the end of her days, Aganetha Smart ignores public opinion and does what has to be done. Even as two young strangers take her from the nursing home (the framing event of the novel), Miss Smart surrenders herself to the adventure, daring to trust a young woman who seems familiar and is also a runner.

That interweaving of present and past, initially confusing, is one of the strengths of the novel. In seamless shifts between the present

car ride back to Aganetha's old home place (the young woman and her brother have a reason for kidnapping the once famous Miss Smart) and her mental reliving of her history, connections between past experiences and present behaviors are laid bare, together with the impossibility of untangling all family bitterness.

Most satisfying for me were the subtle, self-aware insights of the narrator, slipped effortlessly into the novel: truth at its most seductive and unobtrusive. Like Snyder herself, Aggie has always been "[gathering] the clues, apparent and invisible, one by one." (166) Thus she can conclude, "This girl and her brother do not know what it means to suffer They do not recognize culpability if they think I am innocent. They would like to bend the world to their wishes, to absolve them, and they think I need the same things too, but they know nothing about how to comfort a body. No, nor do I. It must not have been what we were put on the earth to do." (166-67) The style in *Girl Runner* is eminently readable, its real magic almost invisible. It's what Carrie Snyder was put on earth to do.

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