

David Bergen, *Stranger*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2016. Pp. 250. Hardcover, \$29.99.

In Ixchel, by an old lake in the Guatemalan highlands where afternoon winds are thought to “carry away sin” and the waters are said to heal, there is a clinic for infertile women to which foreign doctors come to serve and foreign women come with their desperate hopes to be cured. And there is a clinic attendant – a *keeper* – to these infertile women named Íso Perdido, the protagonist of Winnipeg novelist David Bergen’s tenth book, *Stranger*, and perhaps his most compelling protagonist yet.

Íso is assigned to the barren wife of the clinic’s American doctor, Eric Mann, with whom she is romantically involved. Caring for Susan, the woman she considers her rival, tests Íso’s most important task as keeper, namely *igual*: a state “like floating,” being “both present and invisible,” wishing for nothing. Then Íso becomes pregnant with the doctor’s child. When the baby is stolen from her soon after the birth, a triangulated story of love and competition becomes a kind of pilgrim’s progress – Íso in search of what’s lost, complete with trials, enemies, and harrowing journeys by rubber tube, raft, van, bus, and foot across sealed borders.

Literary novels are not often described as page-turners, but readers of *Stranger* will find themselves in one. They will simply have to know what becomes of Íso and her mission. David Bergen’s signature spare style, with its musical fluidity, its steady line of small gestures, sights, and dialogue, advances the suspense. The text seems always on the move, rarely stopping for adverbs or images or long reflection. At the same time, the details or gestures Bergen selects produce an undertow of menace or complexity, which is very literary indeed. The first scene between Íso and Susan (who, we learn later, owns a gallery for “primitive installations”) is a wonderful example of this dynamic: every step of the exchange is on view and it’s lovely and languid. The two characters are revealed, but the tension is palpable too.

The quest at the heart of the novel concerns, at its most literal, the maternal impulse and drive, which is shown to be “fierce with love.” At this level, the reader will ponder to whom a child really belongs – as Íso acknowledges, “A child is unaware... has no choice” – as well as the terrible vulnerabilities of women and immigrants in situations particularly resonant in the world today. Indeed, although the novel has been called dystopian, it reads contemporary to me.

At a psychological, more universal, level, Íso can be seen as an “every-person” in the process of becoming. Her uncle, who spent five years in America, tells her he understands what it is to be “under a spell” and warns that she’s been “hypnotized” in her love affair with the doctor. North and South are not so easily reconciled. Íso must rather seek the truth of her mother’s philosophy: “you are who you are.” She is not a cliché of sentimental servitude or romance or maternity but a vast and complicated woman, like Ixchel – the Mayan goddess of fertility – herself, who is depicted variously in carvings around the clinic as “carrying a sword and a shield...[with] snakes in her hair and...jaguar claws and eyes...a weaver and a spider...and ancient.” What does it mean, in fact, in the midst of power imbalances, the pressures of shame, and obstacles of many kinds, to exercise agency enough to be what one is? What will it cost?

To my mind, Íso, as fictional character, transcends another of Bergen’s female protagonists, Hope Koop, whose portrayal in *The Age of Hope* felt uneven and constrained at times, perhaps because she was, apparently, based on a real person. In *Stranger*, the author achieves a kind of *igual* of his own, Íso seeming to soar out of his imagination as if entirely free of him, full of contradictions (though consistent and whole for all that) and able to fully sustain the reader’s investment in her.

David Bergen is one of Canada’s most assured writers and his eight previous novels and collection of short fiction have won him spots on many prize lists, including the Giller prize for *The Time in Between*. His distinctive style persists from book to book, but he continues to reach for new places in the stories he tells and the themes he explores. His reach in *Stranger* is brilliant and exciting.

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