

Trilby Kent, *Once in a Town Called Moth*. Toronto: Tundra, 2016. Pp. 224. Hardcover, \$21.99.

*Once in a Town Called Moth* traces a family's journey from Colony Felicidad in Bolivia to a Toronto neighbourhood, moving back and forth in its narration between the old and new home. Fourteen-year-old Anneli, renamed Ana in Toronto, narrates the Colony Felicidad sections of the novel in her own voice, but the story in Toronto, where she is less confident, is told about her rather than by her. The stark contrasts between the quietly staid Old Colony Mennonite settlement in Bolivia and the shabby streets of her busy Toronto neighbourhood accentuate the loneliness, insecurity, and exclusion that accompany the displaced Ana and her father and cause ruptures in their relationship. These settings

also provide the context for explanations of the migration of Ana's Altkolonier Mennonite community and family from Russia, to Canada, to Bolivia, and back to Canada. Trilby Kent weaves this history and culture into the novel in an easy and accomplished manner as part of Ana's explanations to her friends, Suvi and Mischa, and as part of a school assignment, thus providing, in an unobtrusive manner, information needed by readers of the novel. When looking at the assignment written for her by an ESL scribe, Ana notes with wonder that "[n]ever before had she seen her own ideas written down on paper like this." She recalls that in Bolivia the only writing at school involved copying from the Bible. The many contrasts Ana makes between her former life in Bolivia and her current negotiations of Toronto are poignant and perceptive.

The emotions experienced by Ana in her unfamiliar setting are similar to those felt more generally by adolescents, regardless of origins, movements, or histories. Both migrant and adolescent dwell in liminal space, and the strength of this remarkable novel lies in the powerful and plausible connections Kent is able to draw between these two transitional figures. The diversity of Toronto, with its "[s]katers, jocks, drama geeks, hot Asians, Asian nerds, Banglas, Somalis, druggies, ADD kids, punks, goths, preps, gender benders, techies, cool honors kids, dorky honors kids, band geeks, arty kids, straight-up nerds" is a shock for Ana after the uniformity of Colony Felicidad. The disorientation of Ana as both adolescent and migrant is intensified by her search for her missing mother, who left the family under mysterious circumstances when Ana was five. Conditioned by desertion, migration, and disappearance, Ana refers to a nanny leaving her children behind in the Philippines in order to look after somebody else's children in Canada as "[d]esperate, but also somehow noble"; she sees the actions of Central American families putting their children on trains to avoid gang recruitment in the same way. She is deeply saddened by the purple ribbons tied on fences, trees, and other structures in her Toronto neighbourhood in honour of a missing child, eventually asking herself at what point the ragged ribbons become negative symbols of absence rather than positive ones of hope.

Strongly empathetic and wisely articulate, Ana is also vulnerable. When reading *A Bear Called Paddington*, for example, she both envies and pities Paddington, who travels from Peru to London, and identifies with him because "he was foreign and easily confused by things." In her attempt to appear mature and confident she does not let Suvi know that she reads books for children. A secret reader of books in English when she was in Bolivia, Ana is also a storyteller, who has a habit of narrating her

life to herself as it is occurring. It is not surprising that a volume of Shakespeare carried from Alberta to Bolivia to Toronto plays a major role in the text, as does the novel, *Papillon*, and the public library where Ana conducts her internet search for her mother.

The achingly painful loss of home becomes more fleeting and elusive as Ana goes through stages of missing its sensuous stimulations, then summoning up those sensations in order to convince herself that they still exist, and finally acknowledging that “it is more work to think about missing [home] than it is just to get on with life.” Toronto becomes real and Bolivia becomes a dream, but even though Ana is relieved that her life is moving forward, she nostalgically identifies what she misses from her past: fields, freedom, and being alone. She senses an artificiality in Toronto, but has progressed to a point where she can think in terms of “differences” between the two places and lifestyles rather than judging one as “better” than the other. Ana’s witnessing of the bullying of her gay friend, Mischa, reminds her of the note left by her mother in Bolivia, which, in its quotation of Perdita’s line from *The Winter’s Tale* – “So long could I stand by, a looker on” – draws attention to the crimes Ana’s mother was witnessing in her family and community in Bolivia. The darkness and hypocrisy of the underside of an apparently pacifist, simple, and loving community such as Colony Felicidad is a familiar story these days, as is the victimization of marginalized teens such as Mischa. Through witnessing the bullying of Mischa, Ana eventually gains insight into the difficult position of witness and “looker on” occupied by her mother years ago.

There are weaknesses in the novel. The conclusion is somewhat of a letdown after the suspense and intrigue of the search for the mother, which eventually provides explanations for her desertion and for Ana and her father’s sudden and secretive escape from Colony Felicidad ten years later. Both Ana and the reader have been eagerly but cautiously seeking this information, which, when revealed, is both shocking and plausible. After the mysteries are satisfactorily solved and the secrets revealed, however, Kent seems to find it difficult to conclude. Other puzzling moments that do not quite work include two appearances by a symbolic migrant spider and Ana’s recurring memory of her mother saving a drowning boy. But these are minor shortcomings in an engagingly fast-paced novel, which admirably weaves a Mennonite migration story with an adolescent coming-of-age narrative and a family fragmented by minor and major missteps and mistakes—or, more accurately, by sins and crimes. *Once in a Town Called Moth* is a captivating novel that convincingly conveys and connects the

experiences of the migrant, newcomer, and adolescent. Trilby Kent has written movingly and memorably about revealing secrets, breaking silences, and moving forward.

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