

Worry Stones. By Joanna Lilley. Ronsdale Press, 2018.

Reviewed by Mary Thaler

Although Joanna Lilley's first novel, *Worry Stones*, traces family relationships through present crises and far into the roots of memory, what attracted me most to this book were the relationships between characters and place. Jenny Ross, an art historian from Scotland, is working in Iqaluit, Nunavut, when she learns that back in Inverness her mother has had a stroke. Jenny is estranged from her parents, not only because of geographical distance, but by years of painful history that culminated with her mother and father disappearing from her life to join a cult. Despite this, and despite the difficulty and expense of flying back from the Arctic, Jenny's two egotistical sisters insist that she be the one to drop what she's doing and race to her mother's bedside.

Nunavut and Scotland form a relatively straightforward axis for the forces dragging Jenny back into family conflict, but as the book goes on, its internal geographies soon gather complexity. They find their most concrete expression in Jenny's collection of "worry stones," which are introduced in the very first chapter with a list of the places they were collected. For the rest of the novel, Lilley uses extended flashbacks to show the important memories tied to each stone. One of the earliest crises during Jenny's adolescence centres upon this question of geography, when her older sisters, believing that their artistic aspirations can only be fulfilled while they live in London, successfully resist being moved to Scotland. Unlike the older Sophie and Maddie, Jenny falls in love with the house her parents buy on the Scottish Borders. Years later when they sell it to join the cult, Jenny's sense of betrayal stems at least as much from the loss of the house as from their abandonment of her. It seems telling that when her father tries to persuade her to join them at the cult's commune, he

shows her photos of the beautiful landscape that surrounds it. Her parents understand that connection to place, and not spiritual arguments, is what carries weight with their daughter.

Within this deeply personal geography, it feels as if Iqaluit gets less emotional weight and attention than the other settings. While the snapshots of the northern town which bookend the novel are highly evocative, Jenny's ties to the place are relatively weak. In this sense she is a typical *qallunaat*, or non-Inuit, passing through the North and forming relationships mainly with other people who are also passing through. The Arctic's greatest significance lies in its remoteness from Jenny's family and from the layered hurts revealed in the novel's flashbacks.

As we watch the Ross sisters grow up back in England and Scotland, we get a picture of parents who, in many respects, are trying their best. They are dreamers who have had the courage to break the mold and forge a new path in life, conscientious in caring for the husband's elderly father, and generous in support of their children's dreams—as long as those dreams align with their own vision. But from the beginning, barbed criticism and flashes of rigidity hint at an intolerance to who their daughters are becoming. Damage accumulates in these family relationships, leading up to the disastrous decision that seems to split parents and children irrevocably. Here, Lilley takes a stab at exploring the question of why ordinary-seeming people get caught up in cults, but the parents' motivations in this part of the novel still feel incomplete. Perhaps this is because the reader never enters fully into their perspective, while Jenny's helpless bewilderment as she watches it happen feels all too real.

Trapped in a peacemaker role between parents and sisters, all of whom are selfishly absorbed by their own needs, it's apparent why Jenny must go as far away as Iqaluit to begin to grow into the artist that her family never allowed her to be. But the ease with which her mother's sudden illness upends Jenny's new life indicates that even the Arctic may not be distant enough.

Lilley writes even the most dramatic events with a light touch, so much that when I first started reading I almost skimmed off the book without engaging with it. But the more I read, the more I came to appreciate the prose style, which is lovely and sensitive without drawing attention to itself. Although some of the worry stones Jenny collects are connected to memories of profound trauma, these events aren't allowed to dominate the

story, instead finding their place within the characters' multifaceted lives. I had to adjust my reading expectations to understand that the narrative wasn't going to linger over some of the shocking bombshells tucked away in Jenny's past. I also admire the restraint Lilley shows by not tying up her loose ends too neatly. As the novel's climax approaches, not all of the family drama gets resolved in a big discussion, nor does everyone get the apologies they deserve. Instead, the very things that feel like life or death struggles early in the story sink naturally into the background as the characters evolve and move forward with their lives—with or without validation from their family members.

The capacity for change, in individuals and relationships, is one of the most hopeful elements of *Worry Stones*. It resonates in one lovely detail which stayed with me after I finished reading. The Inuit artist whom Jenny is interviewing in Iqaluit is a sculptor who has become famous for carving sea-lift vehicles and snowmobiles. These may not be the traditional subjects of Inuit art familiar from gift shops and museums, but anyone who has lived in the Arctic can recognize how essentially connected these technologies are to the realities of northern life. Just as Inuit art has stayed vital and resilient in the face of change, Jenny's strength proves that she need not stay mired in her past. In *Worry Stones*, Lilley shows us an affective geography of people and places that is solid enough to support us, but not so immutable as to keep us trapped.

Mary Thaler lives in Québec City and has spent nine summers doing oceanographic research in the Arctic. marythaler.wordpress.com