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Book Review: *Unleaving* by Melissa Ostrom

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, September 4th, 2019



Unleaving

Melissa Ostrom

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Feiwel & Friends (March 26, 2019)

ISBN-13: 978-1250132819

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In Melissa Ostrom's second novel, *Unleaving*, Maggie Arioli survives rape at a frat party only to have her college town turn against her because the defendant and his friends are the school's football stars. Maggie decides to take a leave of absence from Carlton College, a fictional liberal arts college in Vermont. The book begins with Maggie and her mom arriving at the modest home of her aunt Wren, a sculptor who left home as soon as she could and ends up living in the Rochester area of western New York.

On the first night at her new home, Maggie makes the following observation about her upstairs bedroom, one crammed by four walls and slanted roof:

The room is like a nest. No, grander: an aerie. She crossed to the windows over the bed, where the lake roiled. Now it was the lookout on the mast of a ship. In her breast, she experienced a tightening—a flicker. Maybe she could do better than just hide here.

Thus, the move away from Carlton College offers a promise of possibilities and new beginnings for Maggie. The book circles around a central question: can survivors of traumatic events begin anew? If that is not possible, can they find some semblance of healing?

After posing this question early in the novel, Ostrom then begins exploring the implications of such a question and attempting to find some answers. Ostrom has done her research on trauma studies. She understands the language of trauma, i.e., that the traumatic past intrudes on the present, that the victim finds herself alone and isolated, not trusting the world. All of this is evidenced by Maggie's psychophysical reactions to both external and internal stimuli.

Unleaving is a beautifully written book. The characters are well developed; scenes and dialogue are well constructed; both plot and subplots are masterfully intertwined. Much more than this, the book is written with a lot of heart. Ostrom writes with clarity and intelligence, asking truly important questions in this day and age of the #MeToo and Times Up movements. What are the roles and responsibilities of allies? How should the community respond to both victim and perpetrator? How should colleges and universities handle sexual assault cases? For survivors, what is the relationship between justice and healing? What is the responsibility of one survivor to another?

As a father, I remember being struck by a conversation in the book where Maggie's mother and her aunt Wren discuss the topic of child safety:

Wren sighed. "You want to keep her safe."

"I want to try."

Linnie [Maggie's friend] averted her face, but Maggie read the expression before she hid it: *Good luck with that.*

This is the ultimate challenge for any parent: how to protect our children and keep them from harm. If we can't protect them at all times, how do we help them with life's challenging and painful elements? These are not easy questions, and Ostrom approaches them unflinchingly with tact and grace.

Melissa Ostrom's *Unleaving* is an important, timely, and moving book. I highly recommend it.

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