

Debris
by L.M. Brown
Ink Smith Publishing,
156 pages. \$14.99.

Review by Ed Meek



Debris is L.M. Brown's first novel. It is a coming-of-age story of two teenagers whose lives intersect and who bond over tragedy and family secrets. The novel's title is based on a poem by an Irish poet, Lola Ridge. The poem begins: "I love those spirits/that men stand off and point at/or shudder and hood up their souls..." In Debris, a fourteen-year old boy, Andre, and a fifteen-year old girl, Erin, are obsessed with mothers who have died or disappeared. This obsession sometimes takes the form of seeing and feeling the spirits of their mothers and Brown makes reference to mythological Irish figures that add to the atmosphere of the novel.

In the US, we have this societal bias against grieving. If someone dies, we are expected to be sad for a brief period of time and then to get on with our lives. We tend to focus on the future rather than the past. Our instant gratification culture encourages us to stay-tuned. Otherwise, we might be plagued by FOMO.

When we lose people close to us though, we don't forget about them. They remain with us and continue to affect us. Brown is good at delving into this notion. Her main character, Andre, has problems at school and can't face his own father because, when Andre is involved in a car accident that kills his mother, he blames himself and he believes his father blames him, too. As a result, he leaves the cushy confines of the big house owned by his successful father and moves to a house in a development to stay with his aunt and go to a different school.

There he meets the beguiling Erin whose mother disappeared the year before and who lives with her alcoholic, somewhat abusive dad. Erin wants to find out what happened to her mother. Did she run away? Did her crazy father kill her and bury her in the garden? Erin and Andre are both outsiders. Erin doesn't go to school and she gives Andre a place of refuge while he slowly comes to terms with his mother's death and helps Erin solve the mystery of her mother's disappearance. Along the way, they deal with some nasty local hoods.

The author lives in Massachusetts but has a close affinity with Ireland. The characters speak with Irish accents and the setting and time period are a little hard to pin down. That fits in with mysterious atmosphere of the novel. Brown has also written poetry and she is capable of writing a good sentence. This is the beginning of the novel: "From Eugene's house the sea was audible and across the garden's stone wall the dark surface lit by stars was still as glass."

She is also adept at using third person omniscient to explore the thoughts and complexities of her characters. She creates characters who

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sound like real people. The novel does feel somewhat claustrophobic sometimes moving minute by minute through the thoughts of the characters. The plot plays second fiddle and this reader found himself questioning credibility as the novel went along. Do boys really slap other boys? Didn't a certain neighbor disappear at the same time as Erin's mom?

I have a couple of minor quibbles. The novel has an editor who apparently has trouble with apostrophes: Ines arms, Ines' hands, Ines's dad all appear within two pages. Maybe Cormac McCarthy is right in thinking we should just get rid of apostrophes. There are letters missing here and there, a few run on sentences and occasional confusion regarding point of view. Finally, the font appears to be 10 point, single-spaced with half-inch margins. This allows the publisher to get as many as 500 words on a page. That's why the novel is a mere 156 pages. With more conventional formatting, it would work out to well over two 200 and would be easier on the eyes.

Nonetheless, Debris is a promising first novel and well worth a read this summer.