

Running to Find Ourselves

New fiction from Cara Hoffman

Marieke Bivar

2019

a review of

Running by Cara Hoffman. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks 2018

Inspired by her own youth spent travelling and working in Greece, Cara Hoffman's third novel, *Running*, is a suspenseful punk adventure tale.

It follows Bridey, Jasper and Milo, wild, hungry youths luring unwitting tourists to stay at a shabby Athens hotel in exchange for a place to crash and a commission to spend at the bar.

Jasper's death under mysterious circumstances means Bridey and Milo have to find new ways to inhabit the uncertain, threatening world, with or without each other. Hoffman wrote the novel at a time when queerness seemed even more of a precarious identity to inhabit than it is now

She discusses this in a 2017 interview with *Broadly*, which suggests the temporary autonomy and anonymity her characters find in 1980s Athens is something precious and rare.

Besides her now-familiar themes of violence, poverty, survival, loss and grief, in *Running*, Hoffman explores how anonymity is another way to navigate being visibly vulnerable in this world.

The novel's multiple narratives and voices bring us on a rapid-fire ride as we follow Bridey and Milo's rabbit hole memories back and forth through time. Set in both the intense and violent world of travelling misfits and the netherworld of dispossessed childhood and poverty, *Running* deftly explores queerness, identity, class, and gender.

The obvious implications of the title are that this is a book about avoidance, about fleeing. For Bridey and Milo, the past is something dark, incomplete, unfitting. The avoidance of vulnerability, the need to front tough and be part of something wild and violent, makes it possible for "a girl and two queers" to have this adventure story. But protecting themselves is exhausting, full time work.

Fighting, scamming, and sweet talking are strategies the three friends use to allow them to exist in this world without being mistaken for "small and weak." *Running* exists in a strange present, each of the timelines firmly planted but making the others blurry, shaky, the way something as sharp and raw as the present can become "like a dream...[from] childhood," with characters moving back and forth through different places, contexts, and realities.

Long after their wild years are behind them, Milo and Bridey are still sitting with the loss of the temporary autonomous zone of Athens. Trapped behind papers and books in his office at the university, Milo is existing in a state of fear, barely passing as a professor, longing for a place like the council estate he grew up in or the Bronx neighborhood his favorite student takes him to, where he feels "both relaxed and ill."

Bridey longs too, but is full of survival instincts honed in her childhood. She is searching for family and stability but isn't sure how to build it. Each place she lays her head seems like it could be the start of a new life. She feels the most at peace alone in the woods, where memories of a childhood spent hiding out seem to lull her. "We could live here for free, [she thinks], feeling lighter in [her]step every second...[feeling] clean and cold and alive."

For Milo and Bridey, some things lose their power with enough distance and time while others don't. They are followed by memories of Jasper, and of their childhoods. Their bodies are haunted by a past spent "sleeping out," by hunger, love and freedom. This time swaying narrative is like a poorly lit path we're all on together, nervously picking our ways to the conclusion.

Reading *Running* can make us dream, too: of the wild youths we miss, the stable futures we hope for, or of our own magical autonomous zones where we can pass amongst the other wild ones.

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