

# The Other Mother

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A review of

*The Great Offshore Grounds* by Vanessa Veselka. Knopf Penguin/Random House (Bertelsmann) 2020

In Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, an indecent woman comes gives birth to a set of twins: one cheats poor farmers to make back money for his father, one drops out of college and is eventually killed in World War I. Before all that can happen the sociopathic mother tells the cheating son that they are just alike but he refuses to believe it. He brings his altruistic brother to meet her and the shame he inflicts upon her is the end of her life. These characters are a mix of settlers: early colonial era, as well as recent Irish and Chinese immigrants. Of these settlers, only one set achieves whiteness in America. All benefit from stolen land. All think they have a choice like Cain and Abel. They can choose righteousness or they can choose sin. This is supposed to be freedom; that they can undo generational harm.

*The Great Offshore Grounds*, the long awaited second novel by Vanessa Veselka, subverts freedom and escapes land because at this point we know what Europeans have done for freedom is continually at the expense of other people's lives.

Veselka's novel opens with a lengthy description of Vashon and Maury Island, America. The summering grounds of the many Coast Salish tribes of the region; settlers claimed it, rounded up the various tribes and "redistributed" people into other tribes. During World War II the Japanese American population of the island, many of whom were the proprietors of celebrated strawberry farms, were also rounded up and put on the ferry to the mainland and then to internment camps. It is noted that the people of Vashon "waved" goodbye as their friends were carried away. Then many of the remaining white farmers took their land. <sup>[1]</sup>

I think often of this waving of goodbye as the pinnacle of whiteness.

Our heroes Livy, Cheyenne, Kirsten and Essex would think so too. When the book opens they are already in a bad mood because they have to be on this historically toxic and visually beautiful island for a wedding. For Livy and Cheyenne, it is for their shitty father who they saw one other time before and is now one of those wealthy hippies who perfected the "algorithmic superstructure of predatory capital." Raised

by their single mother Kirsten, a radical feminist who taught them how to survive in extreme poverty, they have a clear analysis of society and their father but not his intention for the invitation.

In a new kind of myth, Livy and Cheyenne are the product of an 80s attempt at polyamory: two women, one man, two pregnancies. Justine doesn't want to be a mother but Kirsten does and offers to raise her child as well. The dude splits, and so does Justine, both on the quest for enlightenment. With very little to offer the children, aside from survival, Kirsten gives them a myth.

"Two women loved the same man. One wanted a baby and the other wanted to chase the North Star. Each became pregnant, so they made a plan. The first mother was happy and the second mother was happy." Neither child knew whose biological mother was whose.

Kirsten's thinking had been that "having an organizing myth is good [...] myths give heroic shape to adolescence in a time devoid of initiation." Wealthy white boys at prep schools get them. Even middle class nightmare people

get them. She knew the world would give her children little and she was determined to give them some story of potential.

At the wedding, their father hands them an envelope, not with money, but with the name that would lead them to the other mother, Justine, and the choice to find her if they want.

The primary characters in this book are aware that they are living in the great American failure. The “children” in this book are Y2Kers, who as direct inheritors of the disorder wrought by Baby Boomers and GenXers, remain children even into their 30s. They have been failed by money and social programs and saved only by Kirsten. But even the daughters are socialized to hate women and hate themselves, so Cheyenne the Hot Mess and Livy the Stoic Lesbian take off, in search of this North Star: the other mother.

“There should be a fucking prize for desire. But there wasn’t” is the lesson that these brilliantly constructed characters all learn as they are often forced to make choices they would rather not face. Veselka probes everything against the false notion of biblical choice. The adopted brother Essex hates the military but joins the Marines because the dream of a bank account, of health insurance, of helping out Cheyenne who is the black hole of his own desire is too compelling. On the streets until he was a preteen and then saved and raised by Kirsten and her daughters, he has that beloved slump that big men take on who are raised by women and feminist ideals. He quotes the myth of Ishtar to his commanding officer and hates men. But there is no way he will let go of his government issued debit card, until a mistake is made.

Veselka’s prose is clear, hilarious, breathtaking and biting. At turns, terrible things happen without any swell of events or prose because just like in life, you are sleeping and suddenly someone has forced their dick inside you, someone abandons you on the side of the road, the gun’s safety is off, you have no health insurance. The myth we are fed is that it is always our own fault.

When the elusive other mother Justine is found, a guru living in a yurt in Bolivia, NC, Veselka doesn’t allow her to transcend the inheritance of violence. Even the guru is enmeshed in settler colonialism.

“India is wild [...] You don’t have much holding you. Come with me.’ She turned. ‘Become a citizen of the world.’ There were citrine flecks in her irises. The empire set in her eyes. She had a flirtatious love of destruction[...] She thrived in acquaintance. She was the perfect teacher. She had nothing to offer.”

The guru, the colonizer, the military general, the investor in corporate fossil fuels don’t haunt our heroes living in precarity but walk right next to them as equals. Veselka doesn’t let anyone off the hook. The children in this book may inherit nothing, but they are born onto stolen land and so they inherit everything.

The first white child born in the New World, Virginia Drake, disappeared at age three before she could understand what was hers. But when Livy and Cheyenne think they are first generation Americans in grade school they are kind of right: they are a generation raised, knowing their ancestor’s complicity and the fallacy of the systems they are in. When a young Livy wonders why her mom doesn’t just lie to people about the broken down car they are selling Kirsten yells “who do you think buys cars as shitty as ours? People who don’t have a choice. Poor people like us.”

The moment of choice is a mean time: it’s the space between death and transformation and a moment of pure autonomy. In Tibetan Buddhism this is called the *bardo*, and it is a state that Veselka’s characters inhabit in physical and literal ways on the road and at sea. The choice might be hard, but there’s a shift when there is some sense of desire in it: lying about your illness so that your daughter can finally fall in love, abandoning a lifetime of shitty cars to move towards a man likely headed to military prison. These choices don’t change the world, and you’ll still die in the end, and that’s the key. Even if we reach utopia one day we will still die, each of us. When we do reach it though, let’s plan that more of us will have a say in how we die, and with greater autonomy to redirect the course of our lives.

## Note

1. Mary Matsuda Gruenewald, *Looking Like The Enemy: My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese-American Internment Camps* (Newsage Press, 2005)

Corinne Manning's debut story collection *We Had No Rules* received starred reviews from *Booklist* and *Publisher's Weekly*. Their book reviews have appeared in *Bomb*, *Bitch*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

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