

GUEST REVIEW

A COMPELLING CURIOSITY

Joan Thomas avoids the sophomore slump with her second novel, writes Ami Sands Brodoff

★ Curiosity

Joan Thomas; \$32.99 cloth 978-0-77108-417-1, 416 pp., 5½ x 8¼, McClelland & Stewart, March
Reviewed from bound galley

The best historical novels effortlessly transport their readers back into the past, while less successful attempts bury the reader in musty research and leave the characters to gather dust. *Curiosity*, the sophomore effort from Winnipeg-based author Joan Thomas, falls decisively in the former camp. Right from its powerful opening, the novel buffets readers with the inescapable momentum of waves against the Dorset cliffs.

A second book can be daunting for a novelist who made a splash with her first, as Thomas did with *Reading By Lightning*, which won both the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book and the Amazon.ca First Novel Award. However, Thomas delivers: *Curiosity* is without question the best novel this reader has come across in the past year.

Set in the early 19th century, some 40 years before Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, *Curiosity* is based on the lives of two real people: Mary Anning, a cabinetmaker's daughter who at the age

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of 12 discovered the fossilized skeleton of an enormous finned creature in the cliffs of Lyme Regis, England; and Henry de la Beche, the son of an elite family who ran away from military college and now spends his time painting and making drawings of fossils.

Thomas alternates between Mary's story and Henry's, contrasting their sharply divergent backgrounds and illuminating the common ground they

share. Mary's family scrabbles for survival, sometimes subsisting on barley gruel for supper. Several children in the family perish due to malnutrition. Henry, by contrast, comes from a family of slave owners who live on an estate in Jamaica. While Mary's sections are largely anchored in the narrative present, Henry's are more reflective; the chapters told from his perspective have a leisurely lyricism.

By counterpointing the two characters' perspectives, Thomas deftly underlines their shared fascination with natural history and mutual suspicion of both convention and suffocating evangelical fervour. Mary asks for "a scientific book" and is given a Bible, which she is told is "all the science [she] will ever need."

Henry eschews both the military and Oxford, choosing to gain his education on the cliffs of Lyme Regis (a setting readers may recognize from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*). Thomas renders

this seaside town in lush language: "Piles of bracken lay washed up at the foot of the cliff: frilled sashes the rosy mauve of elderberry, and flags of glistening black, and brilliant torn sea lettuce, all tangled like an extravagant bed of ribbons."

Henry marries a woman of his class, who does not care about his work, and whose laugh grates on him. He harbours a conflicted love for Mary and an unswerving esteem for her instinctual scientific gifts. For

her part, the constraints of the time ensure that Mary's love for Henry is more torment than joy. She hews to her course, making more significant discoveries, and struggling to maintain her pride despite the indignities of poverty and being "low-born." Thomas draws these characters with such depth, power, and heart that they remain with the reader long after the novel's covers are closed.

Mary first learns how fossils are formed from her father. "How could a creature turn to stone?" she asks. "Drop by drop, the flesh washes out and the stone washes in," he

explains. When a natural history professor at Oxford offers Mary and her father £20 for a crocodile skeleton (in his best week as a cabinetmaker, Richard Anning might earn 14 shillings), father and daughter comb the shore, examining every promising layer and crumbling ledge.

Though Mary is a gifted paleontologist and unearths many important fossils, male scientists exhibit and take credit for her discoveries. One of Thomas's purposes in beautifully reimagining Mary's story is to shine a spotlight on this extraordinary, though historically neglected, woman. At the same time, Thomas vividly recreates a world in which scientific questions, theories, and discoveries were beginning to shake the established Biblical version of Creation.

The subtitle of *Curiosity* is "A Love Story." Readers will savour the moving bond that develops between two unique people whose lives might never have intersected but for their passion for unearthing fossils.

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