

A Reliable Wife
By Robert Goolrick
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It was bitter cold, the air electric with all that had not happened yet. The world stood stock still, four o'clock dead on. Nothing moved anywhere, not a body, not a bird; for a split second there was only silence, there was only stillness. Figures stood frozen in the frozen land, men, women, and children.

If you had been there you would not have noticed. You would not have noticed your own stillness in this thin slice of time. But, if you had been there and you had, in some unfathomable way, recorded the stillness, taken a negative of it as the glass plate receives the light, to be developed later, you would have known, when the thought, the recollection was finally developed, that this was the moment it began. The clock ticked. The hour struck. Everything moved again. The train was late.

At the beginning of this book, Ralph Truitt is waiting at a train station in a small town in Wisconsin in the winter of 1907. The wealthiest, and perhaps loneliest, man in town, he has advertised for a "reliable wife, compelled by practical, not romantic reasons." Catherine Land, the mail order bride he has come to meet, has described herself in a letter as the daughter of a missionary, "simple" and "honest." As it turns out, she is neither simple nor honest. And the reader learns very early that Catherine has an agenda of her own: she plans to marry Ralph Truitt and then kill him.

A Reliable Wife is the debut novel by Robert Goolrick. He credits reading a book by Michael Lesy in 1973 as planting the seed for this novel. Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* is a collage of words and photographs from a small Wisconsin town at the end of the 19th century. Goolrick says that for him, Lesy "unlocks the Pandora's box of country life to show us its dark and ravaged soul." Rural Wisconsin in Lesy's book and as the setting for Goolrick's novel show: "the dark side of the American dream: violence, poverty, degenerate behavior, suicide, and insanity."

Goolrick's novel is a neo-Gothic tale of love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, despair and, ultimately, hope. There is a nod here and there to other classic novels, from Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* to Burnett's *Secret Garden*. This is a story about love and obsession but it is

also a tale of trying to make amends, seeking absolution, and finding forgiveness, especially within the family. "If you don't receive love from the ones who are meant to love you," writes Goolrick toward the end of his own engrossing memoir, "you will never stop looking for it."

When asked about the characters in *A Reliable Wife*, the author comments:

"I think the only thing that matters in life is goodness. It is all we have to leave behind us when we go, all we will be remembered for. It is our soul's wallet. These characters are not good people. They have lived mistaken and cruel lives, done despicable things.

I wanted to see if they could be redeemed, if the tiny spark of hope in each of their hearts could be enough to redeem them from damaged childhoods and thoughtless adulthood. They are strong because they are damaged and have had to fight to survive.

.....It's easy to despise them, for their frailty, their obsessions, their inability to let go of their hurt and their anger. I began with hope in my heart for each of them, and I hope readers will, too."