BLACK CAR BURNING

BY HELEN MORT

BLACK CAR BURNING. Helen Mort. Chatto & Windus (U.K.), 2019. Hardcover, 336 pages, £14.99.

A crowded soccer stadium in 1989, a throng of fans so large that nearly 100 of them are crushed to death. The modern-day crag outside the northern English city that bills itself as the climbing capital of the U.K. Poet Helen Mort sees the ties between the two, linked by the complex tether of trust that links one person to another. In a debut novel that jumps between three residents of Sheffield, a midsize metropolis in Yorkshire, Mort untangles those ties. Climbing, for all its introspection, is not a solo sport; neither is life.

Black Car Burning is named for a route at the Stanage Edge in the Peak District, a miles-long lip of grindstone most famous for climbing routes (plus a cameo in a big-budget Jane Austen movie). But Mort is less concerned with
the route and the climber who chases it, a charismatic young woman named Caron, than the complex web around her: Caron's polyamorous relationship with Alexa, a police community officer who doesn't climb; her budding connection with Leigh, who works in a climbing shop and feels unanchored to the world unless she's climbing; and, even farther removed from Black Car Burning's E7 moves, there's Pete, haunted by Sheffield's real-life sports tragedy known as the Hillsborough Disaster.

As chapters bounce between points of view, interstitial passages speak in first-person from geographic locations. Not just the windswept bluffs and tiny crag caves littered with trash, but Sheffield's crowded streets. Alexa patrols Page Hall, a city district simmering with racial discord between Slovakian Roma and British Pakistani populations; Mort captures the heaving discontent of a neighborhood with no clear way forward. Lyric passages bequeath paved car parks with humanity, and trauma echoes from one generation to the next.

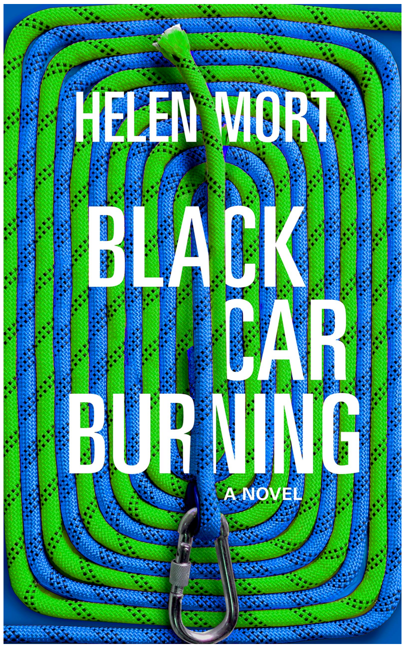
Characters relieve tension on rock, with a refreshing perspective on Sheffield's signature sport. Mort comes at the crag by way of queer women, plus a husband whose wife's skill surpasses his. In brief scenes she sketches familiar one-upmanship and macho attitudes, the hierarchies of bold youngsters and dirtbag seniors. The vague hero-worship for what a climber had done, or said he'd done, or been thought capable of—no one's quite sure. How a petite woman is first dismissed and then refused even acknowledgment when she outdoes her male partners. The scenes are rendered with such specificity, folded into the fabric of her characters, as to blend into the greater milieu of modern sport.

There's nothing clichéd about Mort's community of climbers (unless it's the rickety van that smells of feet, which must be given a pass as a primal archetype). Her characters don't dance on rock, they're martial artists. And a belay is not simply an act of protection, not a lifeline. It's also an act of disappearing, of becoming "a sign you only notice when it's gone. Like a relative." Leigh explains how some measure of disinterest is key, and she can't keep belaying coworker Pete once she cares too much about his survival.

Trust, argues Mort, is not the same as love. It's more basic than that. A stable foothold is less about skill or strength than it is about belief in the rock itself. Her characters dig into the lost bonds between community and police, between romantic partners, between parents and children, to finally unearth the bedrock of connection and build anew.

– ALLISON WILLIAMS

Images



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