

BOOK REVIEW

Risks are taken by characters and author in 'Behind the Moon'

By Michael Patrick Brady | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 09, 2017

Madison Smartt Bell found renown with a trilogy of novels about the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture, one of which, "All Soul's Rising," was a finalist for a National Book Award. But in his latest work he eschews that kind of grounded, historical fiction in favor of more mystical themes. "Behind the Moon" is an experimental novel that toys with narrative convention, venturing a little too far into inscrutability.



Author Madison Smartt Bell

Julie is a 17-year-old from a small town in South Dakota who skips school to go on a camping trip in the remote Badlands with her friend Karyn and three boys, Jamal, Marko, and Sonny. Her initial excitement sours when she discovers that Marko and Sonny have dosed the girls with MDMA cut with LSD in order to take advantage of them. Julie has the presence of mind to run from the pair with Jamal trying to aid in her escape. A frenetic chase ensues across the harsh, craggy landscape, and Julie ends up losing her footing, falling into a deep cave.

It is no ordinary cave, however. Though she is knocked out by the fall, Julie is somehow able to perceive her surroundings. She finds herself surrounded by prehistoric cave paintings. "On the right wall and spreading up onto the ceiling above were bison, such a stampede of bison as she had never seen (even if she was really only seeing them projected

While unconscious, Julie has as an out-of-body experience. The paintings appear to come to life, and her mind enters their primitive landscape, venturing into a world in which time and perspective are blurred and confused.

Get **The Weekender** in your
inbox:

The Globe's top picks for what to see and do
each weekend, in Boston and beyond.

[Sign Up](#)

“What she saw was herself, girl with a hawk, edged red with firelight, half hidden behind a sheltering stone. She saw this with the eye she shared with the bear standing just at the tree line. . . . Eye to eye across that distance. Or just one eye.”

Elsewhere, Julie’s birth mother, Marissa, has a strange encounter that sets her on a journey to reconnect with the child she gave up as an infant. “The sky darkened abruptly. . . . Out of the thicket came an old man with long white hair. . . . You have a hollow in your heart, the shaman said. . . . Go to it now . . . don’t hesitate.” She eventually finds Julie in the hospital in which she was born, comatose.

Bell’s narrative alternates between Julie’s fever dream and Marissa’s real-world mission, though as the book goes on, even that boundary begins to blur. Marissa acquaints herself with Julie’s life and teams up with Jamal to bring Julie back from her dream world. However she begins to see flashes of Julie’s vision, and appears to have her own visions of alternative realities, seeing events play out in different ways. In some, she experiences her own death. “[S]he had the idea that stuff was happening somewhere, on parallel tracks, and it was just good luck that she happened to be on this track — the reasonably benign one.”

In the Julie chapters, Bell’s writing falls short of his poetic aspirations. They are replete with disjointed, impressionistic imagery meant to evoke a heightened sense of perception, but come off more like a rambling account of someone else’s dream or psychedelic experience — always of more interest to the teller than the person hearing about it. “Time is not straight like a spear, but round like the moon,” Julie dreams, “and inside the cave time went around

and around in a dark spiral that included times of many many lives to come — she knew but she did not know how.”

That sense of both knowing and not knowing is imparted to the reader. “Behind the Moon” believes in the significance of its symbolism, but its meaning is not easily grasped. As Marissa’s story grows increasingly less coherent, there are fewer and fewer touchstones that readers can use to orient themselves. The story splinters off into tangents that feel more like tricks or traps than meaningful shifts in the narrative’s point of view. The experiment overtakes the novel, and while Bell can be commended for taking risks, the results of the experiment prove to be inconclusive.

BEHIND THE MOON

By Madison Smartt Bell

City Lights, 280 pp., \$21.95

Michael Patrick Brady, a writer from Boston, can be reached at mike@michaelpatrickbrady.com. Follow him on Twitter [@michaelpbrady](https://twitter.com/michaelpbrady).

Most Popular In Arts

Real journalists. Real journalism. Subscribe to The Boston Globe today.

My Account

Log in
Manage my Account
Mobile Customer Service
Sign Up For Newsletters

Contact

Help
FAQs
Globe newsroom
Advertise

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Google+](#)

[ePaper](#)

[News in Education](#)

[Archives](#)

[Privacy policy](#)

[Terms of service](#)

[Terms of purchase](#)

[Work at Boston Globe Media](#)

© 2017 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC