Three elusive creatures in the Vermont woods

"The Bobcat"
Katherine Forbes Riley,
Arcade Publishing, 2019

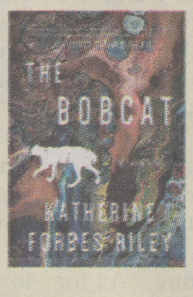
Laurelie is living with her two rescue cats in a caretaker's cottage a few miles from Montague College, to which she has recently transferred. Hidden away in its rural Vermont beauties, she feels safe for the first time since she fled the Philadelphia college where she was raped at a fraternity party. Still, she has to go to classes; and she is deeply disturbed by men, including the advisor who directs her artwork and a friendly linguistics major who loves to argue. Her only steady human contact is the 2½ -year-old boy she baby sits in the afternoons in exchange for some of the rent on her cottage. Their beautifully portrayed relationship is based in a natural world that she lets him discover for himself by collecting dead caterpillars, pebbles, and other treasures near the nearby river. One day, after "sharing" his finds with the river, the boy cries out and points. Turning, Laurelie sees a bobcat … and then a tall hiker who emerges silently from the woods and sits next to it. More disturbed by the man than by the bobcat, Laurelie starts returning to the trail, but as the bobcat moves away, she sees it's pregnant and limping badly.

One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

To her great surprise, she says so to the hiker. He starts to leave, then softly explains that the bobcat was wounded by a hunter in Maine, that she can't hunt, and that consequently, she won't den. As he disappears into the woods, Laurelie realizes that he must have tracked the bobcat on foot for 300 miles.

A week or so later, Laurelie and the little boy encounter the hiker (who remains unnamed until the last page) again, as they stumble upon his tent in the woods near the river. Both adults are extremely uneasy, but brought together a little by the boy's delight in the hiker's dog. In a way surprising even herself, Laurelie offers the hiker the use of her washing machine, and he accepts. When he comes, he creates a wonderful supper out of the simple ingredients she has assembled, but they hardly talk. She notes, without comment, that he is uncomfortable inside, that his nostrils widen noticeably at different stimuli, and that he says nothing about himself. He, apparently aware of the depth of her own injury, asks her no questions. From there, an odd romance begins between two people as private and elusive—and as deeply injured—as the bobcat, who dens and has her kits in the woods beyond Laurelie's cabin.



The love's progress gradually brings both Laurelie and the hiker in from the margins of society in a way Riley's deft psychological hand makes compelling and entirely believable. Laurelie's art deepens and strengthens as she finds herself again; the hiker introduces her to his parents and looks forward to a life with her. It is only when the little boy goes missing that their fragile mingling becomes seriously endangered.

In other hands, this excellent book would hit too hard on the similarities between the three injured characters it portrays. As it is, the writing is at once so spare and so beautifully descriptive that it's engrossing. It contains wonderful descriptions of artistic creation, a dog and its owner playing fetch, a two-year-old's discovery of nature, the beauties of Vermont, and the hiker's home on the coast of Maine. The writing is so good that the reader can forgive the sudden scientific turn of the story near its end, in which a researcher's lecture explains a condition portrayed but not analyzed in earlier chapters. That, however, is a small weakness in a very fine book that has received less publicity than it deserves. Anybody interested in fine prose, Vermont natural history, and nuanced psychological inquiry will read it with delight.