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Book Review

Paul Jaskunas, *Hidden*. Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2004. 240 pages.

Arguably, the essentials of a good novel include compelling characters, beautiful language, and weighty subject matter. Paul Jaskunas's *Hidden* is an unusual combination of these elements - framed by a plot that is restricted in scope, but rich in psychological action.

Writing in the first-person voice of a female protagonist is a bold move for a first-time male novelist, but Jaskunas does so convincingly. Set in the author's native state of Indiana, the novel explores with surprising depth the inner world of 28-year-old Maggie Wilson, a complex and interesting heroine whose story teaches about healing and the mysteries of identity. From the opening pages, when Maggie refers to herself as "the village freak" while searching for dinner in a grocery store, the reader sympathizes with her steady flow of probing observations about the "secretive country" she literally and figuratively inhabits. Maggie, we quickly discover, is a careful observer and thinker with a tendency toward passivity - the kind of person things just happen to.

When the scene shifts back to Maggie's college days, we see how these qualities have made her what she is - a victim of violence, trying to get on with life but imprisoned in her past. While a college senior studying history at Indiana University, Maggie had met Nathan Duke, a business student and son of a prosperous real estate developer. Assertiveness and ambition are Nate's most outstanding traits, if not his most sinister. The courtship of Maggie and Nate was swift but disturbingly passionless; when Nate proposed, the then 22-year-old Maggie's thoughts indicated a strange penchant for detached self-appraisal: "I could not say I was transformed or overwhelmed or that mine was a special love story. I was appreciative that a man like him, who always knew what he wanted and took it, wanted me."

Maggie's need to be honest with herself - to determine what she believes and who she is - becomes central to the novel. After her marriage, it does not take long for her and Nate to grow apart emotionally. While he aggressively pursues his real estate business, she writes obituaries for the local newspaper, goes jogging, or sometimes escapes her empty house to walk alone, "absorbing the stares of residents, wondering about their worlds." Bored and feeling deserted, Maggie has an affair with a co-worker. Nate becomes suspicious and hits Maggie in a fit of drunken jealousy. Then, on a summer night in 1996, about a year into her marriage, Maggie is brutally attacked in her home. Her memories of the incident are not clear, but she believes the attacker to be her husband, and her testimony sends Nate to prison. Six years later, another man confesses to the crime, an event which forces Maggie to return to her troubling memories of the assault and the futile marriage that led to it. In doing so, she must confront not only the possibility that she has sent the wrong man to jail, but the more thorny issue of what her fundamentally mistaken perceptions might signify about her still fragile and searching self.

A feminized version of the wounded Hemingway hero, Maggie is a character whose recovery requires patience and self-restraint, whose emotions must be carefully self-regulated. Maggie's cautious re-engagement with her past is indicated by her return to the scene of the crime, the empty house in the Indiana backwoods she has shared with Nate. There, with an eccentric neighbor offering intermittent support, she lingers physically and emotionally - isolating herself, drinking whiskey, making charcoal drawings, experiencing mysterious seizures, looking through old police reports from the night of the attack - literally trapped in a conflicted and overwrought state. For deliverance, she is drawn to the aptly named New Harmony settlement, site of a mid-nineteenth-century Utopian commune. Here a restored labyrinth of hedges becomes the objective figuration of Maggie's spirit, twisted and obscured by the attack. Maggie wanders in the maze, seeking peace and simplicity: "In all of Posey County, there's no place where you may feel so alone as you do in the center of the labyrinth at sunset." In several passages, the former history student identifies with the settlers of New Harmony, who "traveled from Germany centuries ago to make a home in the wilderness, where the fire and brimstone wouldn't touch them." The purpose of the settlers' maze had been to commune with God; for Maggie, it is a way to "feel the knot loosening," to free herself from her deep-seated confusion.

Throughout the novel, Jaskunas's language is hauntingly beautiful, creating the feel of a remembered dream. Maggie's thoughts are expressed in simple sentences, rhythmic and threnodic, understated in tone but shaded with finely registered feeling and subtlety of perception. Here is Maggie as she begins to reclaim her life and her house:

I roam the rooms when I can't sleep, trying to memorize how the floors creak beneath my feet.

It's not a healthy life. I know that. I'm not concerned. What I long for is clarity, and that doesn't come easily to one with a split-open skull. People of my condition must pursue uncommon strategies of survival. I live like someone enduring a siege. The high-ceilinged rooms of this house conceal me with their thick walls, wood beams, the cherry moldings around the doors. Every corner holds idiosyncrasies that are like treasures to me. The kitchen door moans like a cat in heat. The faucets cough when asked for hot water. And always in the morning and at dusk, the heating ducts amplify an attic dove's plaintive coo. Such curiosities I count as part of my own defense. The house, this land spreading around it galvanizes me toward my central purpose.

Am I sick to live inside the heart of this memory?

Ultimately, the novel is a hopeful story, nuanced in its exploration of memory, love, guilt and trauma, told by a remarkable protagonist who possesses both intellectual depth and eloquence of thought.

Jaskunas, who now lives in Arlington, Virginia, describes himself as a Lithuanian-American (his grandfather was from Ramygala, near Panevėžys). While *Hidden* is not overtly concerned with Lithuania, most of the novel was written in Vilnius, where the author spent eighteen months on a Fulbright fellowship in 2001-2002, and where he met his wife Solveiga, to whom the book is dedicated. In a July 2004 interview with "The Washingtonian Online," the author spoke warmly of the Lithuanian capital: "Vilnius is a wonderful city... a cultural town with a lot of history... My time there was very expansive, and exciting and productive." How important to the author was being in Vilnius, the city Jaskunas calls "a good place to write"? Certainly, *Hidden* is strengthened by an outsider's perspective on American culture, along with a palpable sensitivity toward the landscape and history of Jaskunas's native Indiana - elements that can often derive from the nostalgia of the expatriate. Songwriter David Byrne once famously declared that you have to leave home for a while, and then return, in order to notice things like "doorknobs and the color of white paper." Jaskunas's novel "notices" these things and more, so it is tempting to presume that his sojourn in Lithuania helped to foster a heightened state of awareness toward his setting and subject. Whether or not this is the case, *Hidden* is an excellent debut by a Lithuanian-American writer from whom we expect to hear much more.

Patrick Chura