

## BOOK REVIEWS

C. E. Morgan. *All the Living*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2009. 208 pages. Hardback with dust jacket, \$23.00.

REVIEWED BY GEORGE BROSI

*All the Living* by C. E. Morgan is a striking debut novel. Nuanced, innovative, and compelling, the novel is an especially impressive achievement for an author who is barely thirty-years-old. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux—the publishing house that won the six-figure two-book bidding war—released it as the lead novel in its Spring 2009 United States catalog. The novel is being simultaneously published in England by 4th Estate/Harpercollins and Canada by Knopf/Random House as well.

The title comes from the fact that the protagonist, Aloma, and her partner, Orren, both in their early twenties, are the only people in their immediate families who remain alive. Aloma was orphaned at the age of three and has lived for the last decade at a mountain settlement school. Orren, whose father died when he was young, has just lost his mother and only sibling in a car wreck. The novel begins in the late spring, shortly after the wreck, as Orren decides to leave the mountain college where he is studying agriculture and take over the family tobacco farm at the edge of the mountains. He invites his girlfriend, Aloma, the pianist at a nearby settlement school, to join him.

Orren is overwhelmed with grief and responsibility and the hard labor necessary to make the farm successful, and he is completely unprepared to enter a delicate relationship. Aloma has been sheltered and knows little about housework or cooking or farming or men. Music has been her only escape, and when she is hired as the pianist at the church that Orren's mom attended, she is attracted to the preacher, Bell, a single man dominated by his mother who is as enamored of words as Orren is of silence.

I was drawn into the book immediately, and it held my rapt attention throughout with its subtle plot, virtually devoid of violence, which concentrates attention on these relationships. I felt a strong

sympathy for Aloma, a refreshing character who has little sense of entitlement, no desire to push herself forward, and is not into material possessions. Her thoughtful and lively interior life and finely tuned feel for the way she and the men in her life are interacting make her an appealing protagonist. Her character is strengthened by Morgan's pithy but deep prose that, for example, sums up a difference between Orren and Aloma—"She had never been driven by the imminent loss of something like a home. It was more a matter of what she did not have than of what she could not stand to lose."

The development of Aloma as a character is a real strength of the novel, emphasizing the theme of Aloma's search for identity. This is made all the more refreshing because Aloma implicitly refuses to seek her self-definition from her partner or her church or the land or any other force outside herself. The novel also excels in portraying the key relationships. Here, a central theme is the crucial role that openness plays in interpersonal dynamics.

Although the novel is outwardly seemingly quite devoid of societal dimensions, nevertheless the sensitive reader can pick up quite a few themes. Morgan's master's degree from Harvard's Divinity School is deftly unobtrusive, but real. She renders religion as both a positive and a negative force. The short excerpts from Bell's sermon in which he bemoans that, "what looks like patience, tastes like despair," show that religion can help people to comprehend and respond to their predicaments. Although Aloma seems to remain emotionally detached from the services and the congregation, Bell's rural church is sensitively portrayed.

Inviting innovations sparkle throughout the book. Instead of chapters, readers find breaks indicated by large font letters at the beginning of paragraphs every dozen or so pages. Dialogue is rendered without quotation marks giving it more equal status with interior insights. Stylistically, the prose achieves singularity with its nouns utilized in verb form—"he ran headlong into the wind and rain that cavalried down toward the foothills where it rose and then dissipated over the coal counties. . . ."

The writing also excels in its dramatic attention to easily overlooked details:

His truck, as familiar to her as a face, turned in the drive, the glass glinted. Her eyes followed his progress up the hill, the dust rolling and sweeping low to the ground in blond curls behind his truck, then flanging and fading to nothing.

Morgan's nimble hand renders into strengths several dimensions of the novel that could be initially seen as flaws. Aloma and Orren's lack of family is reinforced by their lack of neighbors, old friends, or anyone else in their lives. Not only that, but the author's strong descriptive abilities are parceled out selectively. The reader never knows if there are trees around the farm house or what birds sing nearby. The couple doesn't even raise a garden. The farm is viewed primarily as a burden of intense labor for Orren. For Aloma, the housework is first overwhelming and then quickly becomes tedious. So little distracts from the book's tight relationships that the suspension of disbelief is not only eased, it is overwhelmed by the impact of the strong focus and simplicity. The novel gives little hint of the time period—it could be any time from the seventies up until the present day—yet that aspect of the novel reinforces the theme of timelessness and gives the reader a straight shot into the dominant relationships without diversion. At first, I found it disconcerting that minor plot threads, provided, for example, by the rooster, were introduced midstream and never developed. As I read on, I began to view this as an inventive way to stimulate the reader's imagination and engagement and to re-direct attention back to what is integral about the central relationship.

Nevertheless, like most first novels, this book does sometimes stretch the reader's credulity. Bell preaches the funeral for Orren's mother and brother in this rural community only a few weeks before Aloma asks for a job as pianist. Although she fails to be open about the fact that she is living with Orren, Bell allows her to work for him most of the summer—and even begins to develop a deepening relationship with her—not realizing she is living on Orren's farm.

Readers of *Appalachian Heritage* will probably note that the mountains lie in the topographical background of the tobacco farm where Aloma and Orren live and also in the personal backgrounds that have shaped their characters. For Aloma, the mountains are seen in a negative light—as the cause of her isolation and a force that constrains and hems in, so much so that Aloma often makes a point of looking outside her home in the opposite direction from them. For Orren, they maintain a positive role, a respite from his work and perhaps a daydream of escape.

*All the Living* introduces a dramatic new voice to American literature, providing one of the most auspicious starts to a literary career in this century. C. E. Morgan is a Berea College graduate who now lives in Berea, so she is a part of regional literature despite the reservations she expressed in an interview with me:

I'm deeply concerned about the tag "regional writer." I think it's a fundamentally pejorative term, serving to marginalize rurality and centralize a kind of cultural and intellectual power in urban spaces, most particularly in the Northeast. If a part of the country permits an exterior force to refer to them as "regional," then they can expect not only their arts to be dismissed by a larger culture always eager to secure its own power via these very dismissals, but their social concerns as well. This particular area has experienced both of these phenomena to devastating effect. Additionally, self-designation as "regional" on the part of an author carries the danger that any kind of group allegiance can interfere with the writer's independence. It takes all of one's strength to remain true to one's own sense of moral obligation. You've got to tell the story aiming for truth.

In that she has succeeded amply with her first novel, *All the Living*.