Autumn, One Spring
by Patti Grayson

Reviewed by Leezann Freed-Lobchuk

Halfway through her debut novel Autumn, One Spring, Patti Grayson slips a request to her readers: “Accept convention in literature; avoid it in life” (214). Voiced by one of her minor characters, this comment is barely discussed within the confines of the page; however, it provides a useful window into the text. Grayson’s novel about a young woman from small-town Manitoba is not unconventional, as it trades in fairly common romantic themes. However, its warm and genuine main character, its authentic portrayal of family triumphs and tensions, and its deftly envisioned setting all help to elevate the plot. Grayson manages to put the “lit” in chick lit.

The novel revolves around Autumn Greene’s return to the mining town where she grew up. Five years before the book begins, Autumn had a one-night stand with her sister Christine’s then-fiancé (no spoiler alert necessary – this information is offered on the book’s back cover). Eighteen and pregnant, she fled to Winnipeg, where she gave birth to a daughter, Sara, and took a job as an office assistant. Fast forward to the present day: Christine is engaged to a new man, and Autumn receives an anonymous newspaper clipping informing her of their wedding date. Seeking forgiveness (or is it revenge?), Autumn drives back to the fictional town of Hematite, where she encounters not only her mother and sister, but past crushes (including her former high school English teacher, Gabriel Ashton), some colourful new residents, and more than a few surprise guests.

Many of the novel’s twists and turns require readers to suspend their disbelief, though at some moments they will be struck by the simple truth of Autumn’s thoughts. As she reflects on her messy past, Autumn muses: “Couples survive infidelity. I mean, when a person is betrayed unexpectedly, where does all that love go? A body has to flush it out, or convert it to hate, or bottle it and store it in the dark. Maybe some of it is thick and sticky like pine sap, and hard to remove. Maybe when it has turned a little rancid it proves the most resilient.” (258) While Autumn has a tendency to overanalyze things, she does offer thought-inspiring insights. Readers will care about her and her daughter, and about the complicated relationships Grayson explores. They will ache for Autumn as she struggles to rise above her family’s expectations, but finds herself falling into familiar patterns, such as the role of the “bratty little sister.” Grayson’s characters are likeable and appealing, the more so because none of them are one dimensional (except perhaps the deadbeat dads). They all have flaws as well as strengths and are driven by complex – at times contradictory – motivations.

The novel’s fault lies in the excessive use of certain tropes. If only there weren’t quite so many secrets, misunderstandings, and surprise appearances in Hematite. The final third of the story drags as readers are hit with one too many plot twists: another missing father’s sudden return, another startling revelation that threatens to derail a wedding that is already on very shaky ground. While many of these moments are funny and touching, cumulatively they start to feel tiresome. The novel barrels along through so many momentous occurrences and hiccups that when the fairy-tale ending finally came, I hadn’t quite recovered.

A few of the characters also have verbal tics that are overused. Autumn has an annoying habit of self-correction: after a particularly poetic piece of inner dialogue, she says, “Too much melodrama,
Autumn,” “Too many metaphors, Autumn,” or “Too much pointless consternation, Autumn.” These statements have the effect of devaluing whatever came before, so if the reader happened to enjoy it they feel foolish. This might have been an effective, even endearing way to show Autumn’s insecurity, had it been used more sparingly. In addition, the romantic lead Gabriel mimics Robin, but with what is meant to be an intellectual twist, as in “Holy well-refined pen/injurious distance/widowed womb, Batman!” This unoriginal device distracts from the worthier writing in the novel.

This finer writing can be found in descriptions of the novel’s setting. Grayson paints a compelling picture of a small town, covered in slush turned red from the iron ore, where weddings are held at the curling club and the bush is a strong, ever-present character. Autumn compares her childhood home to Sara’s: “The temperature is definitely below zero and I breathe deeply to try and calm the chills. The scent of evergreen trees, the damp cache of spring [...] I realize Sara has never smelled the distinctive pungency of the bush before. Her lungs were weaned on city air. What seems so achingly familiar to me – the smells of my childhood – are foreign to her. What will Sara’s nostalgia be? The blinding white heat of the sun reflecting off a paved sidewalk? The hiss and concrete echo of a diesel transit bus?” (130) The book is set in 1986, and while some unnerving parallels are drawn between Autumn’s return to Hematite and the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, sometimes these moments serve to weave Grayson’s themes together: she explores notions of explosions, isolation, and the ties that bind.

In light of all this, “Autumn” was a good choice for the protagonist’s name: the novel is not as light as a summer beach read, not as sophisticated as a heavy winter tome, but entertaining, with some bright and worthy moments. ✤

Leezann Freed-Lobchuk will be graduating this spring from the University of Winnipeg with a degree in English literature, and she recently completed an internship at Prairie Fire.

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