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WHO WILL RUN THE FROG HOSPITAL?

By Lorrie Moore

Alfred A. Knopf. 160 pp.

That there is no voice in contemporary fiction more delightfully witty than Lorrie Moore's has been true at least since her 1986 novel *Anagrams*, and possibly since 1985 when an assortment of student experiments became her first book, *Self-Help*. Her vibrant 1990 story collection *Like Life* solidified her position as our queen of side-splitting one-liners.

None of these books, however, will prepare readers for the dramatic leap in artistic sophistication Moore takes in her magnificent second novel, *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?*

With a dazzling economy that squeezes a wealth of insight into novella size, Moore presents us Berie Carr, who sits in Paris eating brains at quayside with her husband, Daniel, while recalling the summer of 1972 when she was 15, the Sancho-like sidekick watching the quixotic sexual ripening of her best friend and hero, Sils. Both worked at an Adirondack theme park, but it was Sils who played Cinderella while Berie served merely as cashier.

In school, Berie sang alto: "That was always my part. Rummaging about beneath the melody, trying to come up with something low and nice, something supportive." In the bars they'd sneak into, Sils drew the boys as Berie looked admiringly on: "I only wanted my body to bloom and bleed and be loved." In private, the girls laughed together "in the uncontrolled, hysterical way of people who rarely got what they wanted in life though they also didn't try very hard." When Sils found a boyfriend and got pregnant, it was Berie who gradually snuck \$500 from her register to pay for Sils' abortion. These thefts became a habit, leading to Berie's arrest and brief exile to a Baptist summer camp.

Two decades later in Paris, summoning remembrance of things past, Berie is still an exile, sitting at stiff arm's length from her physician husband, feeling his lack of love for her, conceding that "in our marriage we've fought fear with ineptitude, indifference with indifference; the world blows up here and there, and our lives feel staked out in the embers, pitched and huddled in tents."

Moore has never written with greater command and grace, but this novel becomes far more than just the latest tryst in her love affair with language. It marks an evolution, like Shakespeare's in the 1590s, from an intoxication with verbal facility for its own sake to a mature mastery of words as the unobtrusive means for evoking thematic resonance and illuminating our human nature.

Berie Carr becomes the most fully realized and deeply felt of Moore's signature protagonists, Chaplinesque in their ability to keep us laughing at the brink of tears. An early life marked by loss and emotional distance has rendered Berie insecure, scared to trust, anchored to nothing but her own wit and voice. She interprets this subtle alienation as her own insufficiency: "I didn't want anyone to touch me. There was nothing to touch."

Her own house, where people "would come and stay, then go," felt foreign and unfamiliar. She drifted away from her brother, her first friend, by age nine. Her father couldn't even pick her out in the

annual class picture. When her fifth grade class acted out the roles of planets, Berie was Pluto, standing miles outside of town. When she gets arrested, Berie thinks, "I didn't know my parents well enough to be doing this to them." At the Baptist camp, she prayed, then "felt the Holy Spirit enter me then silently cry out and flee." Even with her best friend, with whom she seeks the intimacy absent everywhere else, Berie soon drifts to the periphery of Sils' blossoming life.

While all this has brought Berie to a marriage numb at its heart, it has also forged the resolution and compassion that only pain can, gilding the final pages with a hopefulness unmarred by even a trace of sentimentality.

The astonishing rate of literary growth shown here makes this easily Lorrie Moore's best book thus far. It makes clear, too, that she has not yet written her best book. A decade ago, in her mid-twenties, Moore heard premature voices proclaiming her already a great writer. Fortunately, she tuned them out, the only thing she could do to become a great writer. The result today is a compact volume of enormous power.