Bog Child by Siobhan Dowd

DIGGING FOR PEAT in the mountain with his Uncle Tally, Fergus finds the body of a child, and it looks like she’s been murdered. As Fergus tries to make sense of the mad world around him—his brother on hunger-strike in prison, his growing feelings for Cora, his parents arguing over the Troubles, and him in it up to the neck, blackmailed into acting as courier to God knows what—a little voice comes to him in his dreams, and the mystery of the bog child unfurls.

Bog Child is an astonishing novel exploring the sacrifices made in the name of peace, and the unflinching strength of the human spirit.

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My Personal Review:
One wouldn't think that an Iron Age maiden, an archaeological discovery and Northern Ireland's infamous Troubles could be combined into a successful, even riveting, work of fiction. But talented author Siobhan Dowd does just that in BOG CHILD, a captivating novel that intertwines two eras of history in the story of one young man's coming of age.

Eighteen-year-old Fergus McCann is having a rough go of it. His older brother Joe, the soldier of the family, is incarcerated as a political prisoner because of his involvement with the Provisional Irish Republican Army. His parents are sick with worry, especially when Joe, inspired by the martyrdom of other high-profile prisoners, begins a hunger strike protest in jail. His younger sisters don't understand why everyone is so worried, or why Joe just can't get better and come home. As for Fergus, he has the dual worries of preparing for his driver's exam and his A levels. If he does well enough on his college prep exams, he'll be able to get into a pre-med
program in Scotland --- and escape the violent Troubles in Northern Ireland once and for all.

The year is 1981, and IRA activity is at a peak. Fergus and his family live right on the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland, so close that he can cross the border into Ireland when he goes for a long run or (as they do at the novels opening) when he and his uncle go to poach peat to sell for use as heating fuel.

That's when Fergus makes a discovery that will change everything. Peat moss has an uncanny ability to preserve whatever falls into it. So when Fergus finds a young girls body, he is at first convinced that its another IRA murder victim dumped in the bog. But when an Irish archaeologist (accompanied by her fetching daughter) confirms that the body instead belongs to a girl from the year AD 80, Fergus dreams grow haunted by the girl, nicknamed Mel, whose story is so different from --- and yet startlingly similar to --- his own.

Many young American readers will find not only Mel's story but also Fergus an eye-opening account of history. Dowd does a commendable job of explaining the Troubles to her audience without ever dumbing down the narrative for them. In fact, the writing throughout is lyrical and complex enough to satisfy any reader, whatever their age.

Fergus is a thoughtful, intelligent boy who takes issues of right and wrong seriously. His primary moral crisis --- which culminates in two surprising twists (one humorous, one tragic) --- is not an easy one; nor is the difficult decision that faces the McCann family near the end of the novel and threatens to tear them apart. BOG CHILD handles the big questions --- about personal responsibility, sacrifice, political action, love and borders --- with appropriate gravity, respect and thoughtfulness. And, as Fergus balances counting up the days of Joes life-threatening hunger strike with his own eagerness to embrace his future, it also manages to sustain suspense from the very first page to the last.

BOG CHILD, which has been short-listed for the Guardian Prize, is the work of an author at the peak of her powers. I read, and loved, Dowd's LONDON EYE MYSTERY last year; with her current book, Dowd shows the true extent of her talent. I was saddened to hear that this promising author died last summer after a long battle with breast cancer. Literature for young people has lost such a gifted writer; those who have been fortunate enough to discover her work can be grateful that, in BOG CHILD and one additional novel to be published next year, her voice lives on.

--- Reviewed by Norah Piehl

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