

Chicago Tribune
March 20, 2018

'Out of the Wild Night': With a splish and a splot and a shree, here comes a ghostly whodunit with heart



If ghosts were ever to unionize — and can't you just imagine Local 187 of the International Brotherhood of the Writhing and Shrieking Deceased? — among their demands would be a requirement that “Out of the Wild Night” be inserted into the backpacks of children everywhere. That's because the new novel for young readers by Blue Balliett is more than just ghost-friendly. It is passionately, poetically and profoundly pro-ghost. It shimmers and shivers with beautifully wrought passages that turn ghosts into superstars.

If every kid had a copy of “Out of the Wild Night” close at hand, there would be no more need for nightlights. Teddy bears could breathe easier, as frightened children no longer clutched them with fur-gouging intensity at every post-midnight bump or shuffle.

Balliett, who lives in the Chicago area, has always been able to spin a great yarn. Her previous books include “Chasing Vermeer” (2004), “The Wright 3” (2006), “The Calder Game” (2008), “The Danger Box” (2010), “Hold Fast” (2013) and

“Pieces and Players” (2015), novels that combine crackerjack mysteries with subtle social commentary about issues such as diversity, economic justice and the importance of nurturing curiosity in children. Book by book, Balliett has created her own genre: whodunits with a heart, featuring kids at the helm.

But in “Out of the Wild Night,” she has concocted her best novel yet, a story that blends deft wordplay, scintillating adventure, a provocative mystery, an emphatic plea for historic preservation — and a determined public relations campaign on behalf of ghosts.

A ghost, in fact, narrates the story, which is set on Nantucket Island and consequently sways and jumps with the erratic rhythms of the sea. An elderly woman named Mary W. Chase died a century ago but now finds herself “tossed with no warning into the rough, pitch-and-tumble world of the living.” A great danger stalks her beloved island. But she needs help to fight back. And as the novel proves, ghosts and kids make a great team.

With Mary as their secret sidekick, the kids try to save the island from peril and keep several families intact in the bargain. Let’s face it: There are few forces in the world more powerful than a kid on a righteous mission.

The plot is intriguing, but what really keeps the book humming along is Balliett’s rich, playful language, deployed in a gorgeous tumble of metaphors, allusions and analogies. The sounds of an invisible crowd massing along a beach are downright musical: “Splish, whish, gurgle, shree. Splot, shrok, spatter, crrrunch.” The author’s descriptions of Nantucket — where, Balliett tells readers in an afterword, she lived following college graduation and to which she now regularly returns — are alluring: “The moon tonight is milky, a melting scoop of vanilla ice cream. Haze puddles around the edges and it feels close, as if a kid could reach out a spoon and tilt the sky for a taste.”

The story takes place in November, and November is “a time of crisp, bright moons and of liquid mockingbirds in the tallest trees. ... Skies can be cool and gentle as the inside of a clamshell, a powdery wash of cream drifting toward lavender.” It is a time that brings “the whisper of what’s possible.”

And that may be the most important takeaway of Balliett’s books: a reminder to kids of the infinite power of possibility. Her characters learn that the world is always shifting and rearranging itself, that hard work and desire really can change

things. “Out of the Wild Night” has a lot of fun stuff to say about ghosts, but its true concerns are kids and noble causes.

With its scrumptious language and its briny blaze of seafaring atmosphere, this is a book that was born to be read aloud, preferably on a dark and stormy night when the shutters are rattling and the electricity has gone out, necessitating the use of a flashlight to see the page — a night, that is, when ghosts are inclined to gather round like old friends.

As Mary puts it: “Being dead has its advantages, especially around here.”

Julia Keller, former Tribune cultural critic and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, has published eight novels, the latest of which is “Fast Falls the Night.”

‘Out of the Wild Night’

By Blue Balliett, Scholastic, 320 pages, \$17.99, ages 8-12