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Fates and Furies by Lauren Groff review - a marriage seen from two sides

Like *Gone Girl*, this tightly controlled portrait of a cruel and impossible relationship pivots on a shift in perspective



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Where it begins ... New England. Photograph: Michael Melford/Block Island Tourism Council/Michael Melford

It starts with honeymoon sex on a cold New England beach, and ends with lonely old age in London decades later. Lauren Groff's fat novel *Fates and Furies* is the portrait of a marriage, seen from both sides: first his, then hers. Groff lives in Florida and the early section describing Lotto's youth in her home state has a magic-realist flavour. This golden boy, or "shining one", born in a hurricane, is adored by his parents and aunt until death intrudes, his mother metamorphoses from mermaid to beached whale, and he starts to drink and take drugs with the wrong crowd.

An accident on the beach, a first experience of sex that makes him think of "mangoes, split papayas, fruits tart and sweet and dripping with juice", and Lotto's wayward, tropical youth is brought to an abrupt halt by his banishment to a boarding school in New England. A chilly, lonely spell is broken by more sex and admission to Vassar liberal arts college, where Lotto discovers acting and his future wife, Mathilde, at a party: "He felt the drama of the scene. Also, how many people were watching them, how beautiful he and Mathilde looked together. In a moment, he'd been made new. His past was gone. He fell to his knees and took Mathilde's hands to press them on his heart. He shouted up at her, 'Marry me!'" Of course this is meant to be stagey. Lotto is an actor (he will soon fail, and discover his gift for writing). But their first meeting sets the tone of a relationship that never feels fully inhabited by Groff, or accessible to her reader. The novel makes much of the dream couple's good looks, energetic sex life and fidelity; none of this compensates for their lack of emotional intimacy.

It all makes more sense in the novel's second half, when we discover just how much Mathilde has been hiding. But whereas Lotto's childhood was full of the vivid sense-impressions typical of early memories, Mathilde's biography feels cheap as well as cruel. Groff layers on the trauma so thick as to be implausible: formative events include the violent death of a sibling and abandonment by her parents, followed by years in the care of a French grandmother who is a prostitute and an uncle who is a crime boss with a Van Eyck masterpiece in a cupboard. From there, it's only a short hop to New

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York, where she is robbed of her virginity by a sadistic aesthete - another cliché. The scene of her initiation is simply revolting: "Nobody likes what I'm about to do to you at first," he said. "You need to fantasize to make it work. Stay with it." Groff, inexplicably, makes Mathilde have an orgasm. In the midst of all this is Lotto's supposedly brilliant career as a playwright, with long excerpts from several deeply dull plays inserted in the novel.

Fates and Furies, like Gillian Flynn's bestseller *Gone Girl*, pivots on the shift in point of view. Everything we thought we knew in the first half comes undone in the second. There is a riddle around Mathilde's fertility and a bigger one about her deepest nature: is she good or evil? The narrator either doesn't know or has decided not to tell us, since key facts are left hazy.

But the level of dishonesty in an ostensibly solid marriage is, to me, impossible to believe in. The trail of corpses, including that of a tormented genius composer, is lurid. The private detective who pops up in the book's latter stages seems to have walked in from a cartoon. The style, combining hard-boiled four-word sentences with abstract musings, jarred.

Groff is a manipulator of information, who controls what the reader understands in a novel that is all about narration. She won high praise for a volume of short stories and two [previous novels](#). Here, she has Mathilde express what is surely her own hankering for a "messier, sharper" fiction. Perhaps others will find more to admire than I did in this strange mashup of literary and pulp fiction.

Fates and Furies by Lauren Groff (William Heineman, £14.99). To order a copy for £11.99, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min. p&p of £1.99.

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