

Sarah Murphy's *Lilac in Leather: A Tale of Forsythia, Bedbugs, Faded Cotton & Time*

Friendships, particularly those during significant times in our lives, shape us, pull us in directions we may not have gone had we not been involved with that person. The give and take that comes with friendship, or how we balance the needs of our relationship with our own needs, provides the room for growth and change. Sarah Murphy's novel, *Lilac in Leather*, is an exploration of the struggle for that balance in an accounting of one woman's significant friendship and her attempt to bring understanding and resolution to it.

Alma, the narrator, is talking to herself, pretending to tell another about the intense relationship she had with Laura through high school and their early twenties. Murphy's stream of consciousness style forces the reader to give themselves up to the story, to dive in deep. Sensual imagery woven through with dreams, visualizations, and memories require that the reader stay present and accept unconditionally the narrator's pathways through the story, or be lost. The reader experiences the seduction of giving oneself up to another's story, offering us a better understanding of how Alma could have lost herself in Laura's.

Alma and Laura met at a prestigious private New York City high school to which they had received scholarships. Marginalized because of their social standing and their intelligence, Alma plays Amazon warrior to Laura's Queen in their ensuing intense relationship. After high school, Laura attends art college and Alma devolves into an "art wife", dropping her own college courses to work as a waitress, financially supporting and running their household, writing papers for Laura, even helping her prepare her canvases. Meanwhile,

Laura moves into the avant-garde art community, and involves herself with a Eurotrash prof/playwright and his groupies.

Alma, emotionally abandoned, leaves New York to become a suburban housewife while Laura's success in her work results in her rise as the darling of the New York art scene. Eventually, Laura succumbs to the schizophrenia which has informed her art and is in turn abandoned by her community now that she is no longer able to produce cutting edge work. Alma is devastated – she believes that if she had stayed she might have somehow saved Laura. Her guilt revolves around having left to save herself.

It is the woman to whom Alma is imagining she is telling her story who facilitates Alma's moving forward out of her relationship with Laura. With her, unlike with Laura, Alma is able to find love without losing herself, and to honour her self identity without withholding herself from her beloved. We leave Alma as she begins to be able to achieve a balance in love and friendship.

Lilac in Leather is no bathtub novel. It raises questions of relationship, gender relations, power dynamics, consumption, art and sanity. The details of the narrative are not laid out in a neat package for the reader to discover in order – it's messy, as any woman's story of her teens and twenties would be, and requires that the reader work at staying on track. Sarah Murphy's visually dynamic prose and honesty is disturbing, emotionally powerful, beautiful, and worth the effort.

Sharon Twiss