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# Stephanie Vanderslice's *The Lost Son*: A Review

Stephanie Vanderslice's historical novel, *The Lost Son*, begins quietly, with its protagonist, Julia, waiting in an unwelcoming doctor's office, "the vinyl edges of the examination table cold against her thighs." The prose pulls the reader into the life of Julia, a German immigrant living in New York City in 1945, waiting to see if she is pregnant. Though she does not end up being pregnant, and the doctor says it is more likely that she is nearing menopause, this beginning sets up one of the defining characteristics of Julia: her motherhood. However, Vanderslice refuses to allow that to be Julia's only defining characteristic. As the narrative flows back and forth from New York in 1945 to Julia's childhood in Germany in 1910, the reader is shown how her intelligence and love for stories continues throughout her adulthood, even if they don't seem to be as close to the forefront of her personality.

Vanderslice masterfully pulls the reader from place to place, time period to time period, with prose that sings, allowing the reader to hum with it, to become fully immersed in the settings that she has so artfully created. This immersion comes with the small details that are mentioned, like "a spot on the wooden table where someone had carved the initials JR SN inside a jagged heart" that Julia is running her fingertips over. With the use of these details, Vanderslice weaves together Julia's past and present, revealing information with a gentle hand and at just the right time. When what has happened to

her infant son Nicholas is revealed, the carefully placed thoughts about her husband Robert and her dread about remembering the infant's "insistent tug on her breast" all begin to make sense. Julia is trapped in the past as she tries to survive in the present, and it only makes sense that the reader should be pulled into that same past as well.

Though Julia's past is what motivates her for much of the novel, much of Vanderslice's story focuses on the necessity of hope, on looking forward rather than back. Vanderslice encourages the idea of faith in humanity, even in the face of betrayal, even in the face of the horrors that the characters learn are occurring just overseas in the Second World War. In spite of the enormity of these events, Vanderslice reminds readers of a truth that is still relevant today: no matter the largeness of what is occurring, we are all still human. We are allowed to want things for ourselves and to be treated with respect, with love. One of the most poignant moments of the novel, in my opinion, is after Julia has gone on a date with Paul, and Vanderslice writes, "Julia wasn't sure she had ever felt more listened to in all her life."

In addition to its focus on motherhood and on womanhood, however, the novel explores a plethora of different topics, making it a story that any reader will find compelling.

Vanderslice touches on everything from the experience of soldiers in World War II, to the incubator babies on Coney Island, to the struggle of being an immigrant. *The Lost Son* refuses to be defined as only one thing, just as Julia refuses to be pigeonholed into any one role, whether that is as an immigrant, woman, or mother. Though this novel is surely historical, its themes follow us into the present day, and the questions that it presents about love and loss, about family and betrayal, are ones that will cause readers to take pause, to look at their own lives. Do you allow yourself to enjoy the moment, the life, that you are living in? Or have you become "so preoccupied with waiting" that you have "given no thought to what would happen afterwards"—whatever that afterwards is for you? Because there is always something. Something to wait for, to work towards. It is all too easy to forget to care for ourselves in the now, when there is always something that we can be reaching for, whether that something is in the present or in the past. For so much of her life, Julia struggles with allowing herself to be wanted, to be proud, to see her own worth.

As such, Julia's lost son, Nicholas, represents the title of Vanderslice's novel, but not the heart of it. In the end, Vanderslice allows Julia to come to the realization that, "all we can do is mend ourselves. Mend ourselves by reaching out for one another, even when it's hard. When it's frightening. Honor the dead by living. By telling their stories and inhabiting our own." Julia realizes that she can be the beating heart of her own story, and by the end of *The Lost*

*Son*, she has claimed this story, her life, as her own. Not Nicholas', not her son Johannes', not her sister Lena's, not even Paul's. Hers.