Books

Book Review: "Alice & Oliver"

By Charles Bock (Random House)

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It is late autumn in New York, 1993. A young couple is on their way to Vermont for Thanksgiving with their infant daughter. Alice, a successful fashion designer, is vibrant and ambitious, thrilled to be a new mother. Her husband Oliver, a computer programmer, is working hard to get his tech startup off the ground.

Yet within the span of a few pages of Charles Bock's novel *Alice & Oliver*, Alice — coughing, weak, feverish — receives a devastating cancer diagnosis. Instantly, we are swept into a world of hospital stays and cancer treatments, medical professionals and insurance representatives. In the midst of debilitating chemotherapy, in the space of cramped hospital rooms, the couple is confronted with issues of trust and partnership and forced to redefine what it means to love and be loved. As Oliver says: "It's a necessary pain: understanding there are fissures that cannot be healed, our time here is messy."

It is, sadly, familiar territory for Bock, who teaches writing at Columbia's School of the Arts. In 2009, when Bock's daughter was six months old, his wife was diagnosed with leukemia. She ultimately died of it, and Bock faced financial ruin from the medical expenses. Armed with his memories, Bock expertly juxtaposes the many frustrations of the health-care system (arguments with insurers, painful medical procedures) with the small joys of life (an infant's hand reaching toward her father's, secret jokes shared between a couple).

The story is perhaps most deeply affecting when it focuses on Alice. Oliver often fades in relation to the agony and complexities of her plight. With her body and mind pushed to their limits, Alice is vulnerable and exposed, and desperately grasps at the familiar moments, the glimmers of normalcy that break through even the darkest times. *Alice & Oliver* is a window into the heartbreak of helplessness and the struggle to maintain a sense of self and dignity when nearly all else is stripped away. With clarity and care, Bock has created a beautiful, challenging story.

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