

ISABELLA MOON: A NOVEL
by Laura Benedict

Synopsis:

Idyllic Carystown, Kentucky has been scarred by the mysterious disappearance of a little girl named Isabella Moon. Hindered by an almost complete lack of evidence - lack, even, of a body - the case of the missing girl is still open after two years, and, though the media circus which engulfed the small town has long since subsided, Sheriff Bill Delaney is no nearer a resolution. Kate Russell knows that Isabella is not missing, but dead. The ghost of the young girl has disrupted Kate's quiet life, beckoning to her to follow, to reveal to Kate the truth about her death. As Kate is drawn into the investigation, the charming facade of Carystown starts to crumble - the small town will be forever changed by the disappearance of the Isabella Moon, undone by murder, secrets, and lies.

Excerpt:

Mary-Katie.

The voice is a whisper, calling a name that doesn't belong to her anymore.

Mary-Katie.

Kate struggles as though she's escaping from a troubled sleep, her movements slow and exaggerated, as in a dream. But if it is a dream, why does she slip some nearby shoes onto her feet as she gets out of bed? Who thinks of shoes in a dream?

The hillside outside her window is bathed in silver light, and there, beneath the hickory tree shading the back porch is a girl.

Mary-Katie.

The voice doesn't seem to be coming from the girl, but from inside Kate's own head. Her breath fogs the glass as she watches, knowing that the girl wants her to come outside.

Suddenly she is following the girl over the hill and across the open pasture on its other side. Her feet are light as she runs—yes, she is running!—through the brittle

stubble of the winter grass. The few lights of the town are ahead of her. She doesn't often go into town this way, usually preferring to stick to the familiar road that runs in front of her own little cottage. But the ground is firm and fast under her and she wonders why she doesn't come this way every day.

The girl disappears into the dark stand of trees at the edge of the pasture but Kate knows she is still there, waiting. Even if she has run on ahead, Kate understands that she will find her. She is meant to find her.

There she is, standing in the street beyond the trees, her brilliant yellow coat vibrant as a balefire in the night.

Kate runs faster and the girl turns her back and leads her on toward the town, through the grounds of the old medical college, where the buildings stand mute and shuttered, through the backyard of the crumbling president's house, where a single rusting bulldozer sits as testimony to someone's forgotten plans.

As the girl runs out into Main Street without pause, Kate's heart jumps, but there are no vehicles at all, not even a straggling log truck or a sheriff's cruiser. As they pass Main Street's glassy storefronts, Kate is racing her own mirror image, but she can't stop, she won't stop because the girl will not slow now. They cross over to Bridge Street and follow it until it ends in a blinking yellow light. Will the girl go left or right?

When she goes left at the corner and disappears behind a tall hedge, Kate keeps going. As she passes the Methodist parsonage with its stiff wrought iron fence, she wishes that she had a stick to hit against its spindles and realizes at the same moment that yes, there is a stick in her left hand. But when she reaches out with it as she runs, there is no satisfying plunkplunkplunk of wood against iron. In fact, there is no sound around her at

all except the sound of her feet striking the pavement: no dogs, no sirens, no night birds. She's not afraid. She is certain once again that she is dreaming.

The girl reappears in the light from the streetlamp at the next corner.

Isabella!

How does she know the girl's name? She hadn't seemed to know it when she looked out her bedroom window to see the girl standing in beneath the hickory tree like someone's lost shadow.

The girl pauses at Kate's voice, but doesn't turn around. Kate sees that her dark hair is shot with glimmering strands of silver. But she knows the girl can't be more than ten years old and the silver is just a trick of the light from the streetlamp's broad halo.

Isabella!

The girl begins to run again.

Kate drops the stick, thinking it might speed her progress. In the next block there is a Rottweiler who growls when she passes on her regular evening walks and she has often carried a stick as a sort of talisman, thinking she would use it on him if she had to. But still there are no animal sounds, no lights on in any of the houses she passes, no cars slowing down to see why a woman is running through the streets in the middle of the night in her pajamas, wearing a scuffed oxblood loafer on one foot and a tan and white nubuck slip-on on the other. She is safe from the dog, at least.

They approach Birchfield Avenue, where Kate's friend Lillian lives. But instead of going down Lillian's street, the girl enters the first road, one where there are no streetlamps. This road—Kate doesn't know if it even has a name—twists through a set of woods for a distance to finally end at the town's water processing plant. No one lives

back here in this no-man's land, the unofficial divide between Carystown's small black community and the rest of the town. Amazed that she is not winded, she catches up with the girl, who has finally slowed. Without streetlamps, the road is black at their feet and the trees around them are like walls reaching to the sky. But Kate can see well enough: The silver in the girl's hair is its own light, and Kate follows her easily.

Isabella must want her near. As they slow to a walk, Kate realizes that the girl is as silent as everything else around them. If it weren't for the scuffing of her own feet, Kate would think she'd gone completely deaf.

Without warning, the girl leaves the pavement and heads across the road's shoulder.

Wait!

As Isabella pushes her way through the brush, Kate tries to keep up. But the girl seems unhindered by the brambles and tangle of slender branches that whip against Kate's arms and face. The brambles sting and Kate laughs to herself that it must be a pretty pitiful dream if she can't even keep from getting scratched up in it.

Now they are in a clearing that Kate can't remember ever seeing before. Part of its ragged circle is an expanse of brick that shines a brilliant white even in the dim moonlight. Kate has the feeling that if she were to put her hand against the wall and push, ever so lightly, it might disappear. She has that feeling, too, about the tall cedars that rise around them, their uppermost branches drawn together in soft, wavering points against the sky. Beneath her feet the ground is spongy and she is surprised to realize that the clearing, though silent, has a distinct smell. She covers her mouth with her hand.

She thinks about those times when she wakes herself to use the bathroom in the night, turning on the light, even pinching her thigh as she sits down to urinate to make sure that she is not dreaming, that she is not about to drench herself and her bed. Now, she resists pinching herself because she has begun to suspect that she is not dreaming. She knows that if she rests her fingers against her thigh and squeezes, the pain will be just as real as the smell of decay filling her nostrils.

She calls to Isabella, who stands in the center of the clearing. But the girl only sinks to her knees, her silvered hair falling forward over her yellow coat.

As Kate approaches her, the wind picks up around them and the smell intensifies. Unafraid, Kate reaches out thinking to touch the girl, to stroke her young head, to reassure her that someone is there, that someone wants to help her. But her fingers touch nothing and Kate is alone in the clearing.

She stands there for a moment as the sounds of the woods and beyond reveal themselves: a screech owl in some distant barn, a rabbit or raccoon hurrying through the brush, a truck downshifting out on Route 12. Suddenly cold in the pajamas that had been fine for a March night spent beneath a down comforter, Kate wraps her arms around herself as though it will make a difference and begins to think about the long walk home.