

BOOK REVIEW

A cold that bites in Sarah Manguso's 'Very Cold People'

By **Rebecca Steinitz** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 3, 2022, 7:23 p.m.



COREY CORCORAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Those of us who grew up in Massachusetts in the last decades of the previous century will find much that is familiar in Sarah Manguso's first novel, "[Very Cold People](#)." Manguso, author of several books of spellbinding nonfiction, depicts the fictional town of Waitsfield with documentary-level realism. Cabots, Lowells, and Emersons live in centuries-old saltboxes and colonials and send their children to The Lodge School, while "the kids who lived in the Bannon Road projects...were in the Special Ed class...[and] had Boston accents, which is to say the accents of the poor." Snow day announcements on the radio begin with "*Abington. Acton. Andover*" and wend their way to "*Wenham. Weston. Weymouth.*"

Anyone who remembers listening carefully for the name of their own town will recall how cold it was and how many kinds of snow there were in that era before climate change: "The powder of the coldest days, too cold to melt, squeaking at the boot. White wet snow squeaking against my teeth, melting clear in the heat of my mouth." But in this carefully constructed novel, the pervasive cold is as human as it is meteorological.

Our guide to Waitsfield is Ruthie, who is neither rich nor poor, Brahmin nor bumpkin, but rather Jewish, bookish, lonely, and observant. The occasional hint that Ruthie might blossom into a writer, like so many fictional young readers, or find love, like other literary wallflowers, never comes to fruition. Instead, we watch her grow from small child to young adult, and through her eyes, baffled one moment, astute the next, we see her world.

That world begins with her penny-pinching, socially skittish parents, who are so cold and cruel, to Ruthie and each other, as to be practically ice incarnate. It radiates outward to her neighborhood, town, friends, and elementary, middle, and high schools. Manguso's trademark discrete paragraphs, separated by (snowy) white spaces, accumulate in detailed taxonomies of food and eating habits, bodies and their injuries, school and its tribulations.

Formal and informal social structures receive similarly anthropological attention, from class distinctions and the nuances of bullying to the rituals and tokens of gift exchange, which may hold this frigid society together but never truly bonds it. In third grade, Ruthie's classmates give her "stationery sets and pencils and stickers, [which] my mother and I carefully set aside to give to other girls when they had their birthday parties."

Ruthie's friends are the alphabetically appearing Amber, Bee, and Charlie, distinguished in contradistinction to each other and Ruthie along Waitsfield's social and emotional axes. Amber lives in Ruthie's working-class neighborhood, but she has a "cloud of charisma" and her father is kind. Bee is slow and picked on but doesn't notice. Charlie lives in a big house and is wildly generous, but her mother is rude and judgmental. None are as self-conscious as Ruthie, who is ever yearning and perpetually "bathed in shame." The cause? Practically — and justifiably — everything: inappropriate parents, cheap clothes, the boy who is forced to dance with her in a school play, a teacher's cruelty involving a Bunsen burner and match, after which "My shame fell from the ceiling like snow." In Waitsfield, even heat generates cold.

As the girls reach high school, their experiences at once diverge and converge. Academic prowess and class origin become powerful, often cruel dividers, but the well-foreshadowed last chapters home in on sexual abuse, which knows no boundaries. Perpetrated by intimates and strangers alike, mundanely destroying lives, this is perhaps the most shared experience in Waitsfield, even as "All the girls in town thought they were unusual, that they were the only ones, the only weird, unlucky little ones."

This too is where Waitsfield becomes a discomfiting pun, the place where girls can do little but wait. "All the Waitsfield girls, in their little rooms, all through the town, lie down and wait" for their inescapable abusers and perhaps the possibility of something more: "All of these Waitsfield girls together, with their burdens. Imagine twenty of them in a room, all day, thinking about each other. Thinking about what was still going to happen to them. They could see the future, a little. They so nobly faced it, patiently waiting."

Yet to the end, Ruthie remains adjacent to that collectivity. If this is ultimately to her benefit, the novel's abrupt ending seems at once narratively inadequate and an implicit narrative reward for the self-awareness Ruthie shares, not with her peers, but with the other observant, bookish girls of literature.

In a recent interview, Manguso says she wanted to write a book about “the 400-year-old town she grew up in outside of Boston...she imagined the book would be nonfiction, but... ‘it turned out that memoir wasn’t a large enough form to contain everything.’” It is difficult to make hard and fast distinctions between fiction and nonfiction in this era of autofiction on the one hand and redemptive memoir on the other. Manguso is an exquisitely astute writer, and there is something admirable about her refusal to bow to predictable plot tropes that might rescue Ruthie more definitively — or condemn her. Still, her efforts to describe “everything” about Waitsfield may leave readers more chilled than satisfied ... which is perhaps the point.

VERY COLD PEOPLE

By Sarah Manguso

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