



The Belle of Two Arbors

Paul Dimond

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Locals can take pride in Dimond's depictions of Michigan's natural beauty.

Alternating between Glen Arbor and Ann Arbor in the early to mid-1900s, Paul Dimond's atmospheric fictional biography relates the life of a poet, Belle Peebles, a young woman whose love for her family and her home defines her and drives her. Belle's ambition and distinct voice animate *The Belle of Two Arbors*, giving dimension to the lengthy novel.

From the moment of her mother's death when she is fourteen, Belle yearns to take control of her life. Helping to raise her younger brother, Pip, while crafting a future for herself as a writer in rural northern Michigan proves a difficult yet rewarding venture.

The success of her father's growing business helps pay for her place at the University of Michigan, where she apprentices under poet-in-residence Robert Frost. Pip follows. From there Belle's career blossoms, even while society attempts to push her into a traditional position. Her free spirit and ambition shape the story, and she forges a path for herself while still taking care of her family and dear friends.

The setting of the novel is the most important—and best executed—facet of the story. From Belle's long swims in Lake Michigan to the shifting architecture of the University of Michigan campus, each page contains vivid portrayals of the Michigan landscape:

We watched the whitecaps rising on the bay as the breeze stiffened ... we walked through the forest so quietly we scared up not a single rabbit, squirrel, toad, butterfly, or bird.

Belle's poetry, which is scattered throughout the story, incorporates water imagery and reveals her love for her home. Her adoration of Emily Dickinson and water-focused pastimes, as well as her professional relationships with D. H. Day, Ted Roethke, and Robert Frost, are as realistic as they are vital to Belle's story.

While at times the story is slow—due in part to the novel's length—the pace matches the lakeside lifestyle many of the characters lead. Additionally, the engaging dialogue and dynamic relationships between characters bring tension to Belle's life story.

The changing kinship between Belle and Pip as they grow up, for example, reveals the integrity and courage innate in both siblings. It's easy to forget that Belle is fictional in these pages, rather than a genuine historical figure.

Locals can take pride in Dimond's depictions of Michigan's natural beauty, while those nostalgic for the lakeshore will yearn to plan a visit to the magnificent state.

AIMEE JODOIN (May 26, 2017)

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