

The Lion Tamer Who Lost

Louise Beech

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Centering on an excruciatingly passionate love story, Louise Beech's *The Lion Tamer Who Lost* is a rich literary text that includes family tragedies, unexpected discoveries, and second chances, all considered against the vibrant backgrounds of England and Zimbabwe.

After their all-encompassing romance stalls against a startling revelation, Ben and Andrew part ways. On a November day whose “breeze was full of cold promise,” Andrew heads home to recover, hoping that his bone marrow transplant will turn into a cure, while Ben heads to Africa to work on a lion preserve and fulfill a childhood promise. Both depart with broken hearts.

The text's tragedies are acute, and the love stories that fill its pages are searing. Ben and Andrew are first pulled together at a near cellular level. Andrew's mother, Alice, loved brightly once too, and that flaring passion informs Andrew's choices, as Ben's father's more salacious appetites inform Ben's.

Settings are rendered with careful, sensual details that go far beyond the book's palpable hot breezes and cold rains. The same attention is applied to capturing the intense longing of first kisses and the agony of goodbyes. Secondary characters are captivating, too—from Esther, who offers Ben a comfortable place to hide, to Lucy, the lioness whom he helps to rescue as a cub and in whose struggle to survive he sees reflections of someone else.

Andrew's answers come from a less wild place—not in dreams pursued but in dreams fulfilled, when the novel he's poured himself into achieves sudden success. As the men grow apart, and eventually back toward each other, they struggle to reconcile themselves to the new secrets they feel compelled to keep (and the ones that they don't want to keep at all). In its surprising turns and lovely particulars, *The Lion Tamer Who Lost* is a beautiful text.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March/April 2019)

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