

Trondheim

Cormac James

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A crisis exposes faultlines in a marriage in Cormac James's whipsmart, lyrical novel *Trondheim*.

In the winter, *Trondheim* ought to be magical, but to Lil and Alba, who are in the grip of a family emergency, it reads as surreal. They've received the worst of bad news: their healthy twenty-year-old son, Pierre, is in a coma. He might come out of it; he might not. If he does, he might have brain damage. Every day in the ICU is another day that death is kept at bay.

The *Trondheim* medical facility is top-notch; its staff is experienced and empathetic. Pierre's young doctor has an interesting hobby of target practice on the hospital rooftop; it's a curious metaphor for how she plays God. To wake Pierre out of his coma, doctors sink him deeper first, rest his heart, and then shock his system. The uncertainties riding on this procedure are vast.

As Lil and Alba travel from their Montpellier home to *Trondheim* for Pierre, scalpel-sharp lyricism pares back their emotional and psychological states. Meticulous details expose their private anxieties and maternal devastation too. Their methods of coping diverge: Lil is pragmatic and tough, worrying about astronomical medical bills; Alba leans on rosary beads and plastic optimism.

The book is compelling throughout. The psychological toll that Pierre's state takes on Lil and Alba heightens through accounts of their day-to-day bedside vigil and each failed attempt of the procedure to wake him. Lil seeks solace in an ex-lover; Alba keeps mum about the betrayal. They drift apart even as they stand in solidarity for their son.

Trondheim is an exquisite novel that explores maternal love, the price of hope, and how bodies endure.

ELAINE CHIEW (January / February 2024)

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