



Ruby's Spoon

Anna Lawrence Pietroni

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Cradle Cross in 1933 is a town in the heart of Black Country, England, still reeling from the Great War and dominated by a button factory in terminal decline. Into this exotically grim environment arrives a white-haired young woman from the coast named Isa Fly. Isa is a mysterious and magnetic presence who exerts a romantic pull on everyone she meets. Motherless, thirteen-year-old Ruby Tailor is instantly drawn to her, as is Captin, the proprietor of the local chip shop, a fifty-year-old bachelor and father figure to Ruby, and Truda Blick, the Oxford-educated spinster who's inherited the failing button factory. As the reasons for Isa's sudden appearance become less clear with each passing day, she is viewed with increasing suspicion by the tight-knit women of Cradle Cross who come to see her as the cause of the town's accelerating misfortunes and ultimately fear her as a witch.

Anna Lawrence Pietroni, in her fiction debut, captures for the first time the dialect of Black Country, and the effect is utterly mesmerizing. Cradle Cross is a town out of time—battered by war and yet linked to a distant past, an isolated pocket of the country whose customs and views have remained intact since medieval times, where talismans protect loved ones and rituals can help wring away the grief of loss.

Lawrence Pietroni has created two uniquely alluring characters—Ruby and Isa—and spins a story that feels mythical or folkloric, that is driven by a mystery, throbs with tension, and ends in conflagration. Ruby's Spoon combines a gritty, hypervivid realism with the dreamlike richness of a fable.

Ruby's Spoon Details

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From Reader Review Ruby's Spoon for online ebook

Ali says

This is the second debut novel in a row that I have read this month, and I continue to be impressed. I bought Ruby's Spoon because the author is due to speak at a local meet up group that I attend later this week, and I thought it would be nice to have read the book beforehand.

Set in the Black Country during the 1930's Ruby's Spoon is a kind of grown up fairy tale, telling the story of a lonely young girl while weaving together the folklore of witches, mermaids and the local superstitions of the time.

"This is the tale of Ruby Abel Tailor, who could not cross the water but who dreamed of an easy plenty by the sea. This is the tale of three women – one witch, one mermaid and one missing – and how Ruby was caught up in between"

Motherless thirteen year old Ruby lives in Cradle Cross, a working class Black Country community nestling alongside the canal. Ruby is brought up by her grandmother a tough woman who has a morbid terror of Ruby going anywhere near water. Ruby's absent father lives along the canal on which he works; only noticing Ruby when she delivers him his meals, or fails to. During the long hot summer of 1933 Ruby helping out in Captin's fish and chip shop, witnesses the arrival of the stranger Isa Fly, brought by the canal, but hailing from the sea that Ruby so longs for.

"The stranger said she had to find a cheap room, just for a night or two. Watching her, sat cautious and unsteady on the edge of Captin's one-armed sofa that sprouted horsehair around the studs and buttons, Ruby could see what had made her afraid of this woman. She was guarded, Ruby thought, as if she held at bay a secret – jumpy, yappy, like an untrained hound that could leap free and knock the air from Ruby, knock her to the ground. The scarlet cloak, the salt white hair that settled heavy on her shoulder like a pelt – the hair of an old woman on the head of a young soul, for the woman was still young, and her skin lambent and unlined. And more than this, the strange unbalanced eyes – one dark as coal, the other gauzy white. "

Isa tells a story of her ill father who has sent her to find his other missing daughter, and Ruby decides to help, believing that Isa will take her back to the sea with her when she leaves. Carrying with her, the precious almanac that once belonged to her mother, Ruby lists everything that occurs to her, asking questions of those around her in a bid to help Isa find the person she seeks. In Isa however the locals see everything they fear, and so when Isa allies herself to the other outsider, the button factory owner Truda Cole Blick, their suspicions are really roused. Truda has recently inherited the factory and things are not going well, when Truda starts calling in ancient debts and laying off workers, many see Isa Fly as at the root of their troubles. Ruby finds herself drawn into the sphere of Truda Blick and Isa Fly, running errands for Truda who gives her a bicycle, and trying to unravel the mystery Isa brought with her. Ruby enjoys the friendship and trust of these women, but soon discovers that these alliances bring unexpected dangers with them. Always watching from the water is "The Blackbird" the mysterious boatwoman of Cradle Cross, who operates the dredger along the canal. When things begin to go missing locally, Isa Fly is blamed and things start to take an altogether darker turn as talk of witch thieving begins.

"But even here in Cradle Cross where the streets breathed fire, they never thought they'd gather in Horn Lane at the dead end of that long hot summer, of 1933, to watch a witch burning."

Ruby's Spoon is much more, however, than a dark little fairy tale, it is the story of a young girl in need of mothering, the story of a community, with its suspicions, social structure and poverty, that each play a part in the story of Ruby and Isa Fly. I have to say, I think the writing is glorious, the language of this novel is rich and evocative, creating a wonderful sense of place, and shot through with the unmistakable dialect of the Black Country – a dialect I have a particular fondness for. I have seen some reviews of this novel stating the reader had problems with the dialect – so maybe it helps to know the dialect a bit – but I loved the authentic speech of these characters, it adds a warmth and roundness to the characters, allowing them to emerge, fully

fleshed out from the pages.

Ruby's Spoon is an excellent read, and such an impressive first novel, I really hope that I will get the opportunity to read more from this writer in the future.

Paula says

Eh. It was alright. Really hard to read at first, since she writes the dialog phonetically & the accent is very heavy. I don't feel that I wated my time, but I wouldn't recommend it either.

Carol says

In some ways, the word choice and character dialect interfered with the story; in other ways, it enhanced it. Her words were sharp and clattered, her setting descriptions were pastoral and vintage. She evoked settings of ancient, half-forgotten tales and superstition, a crabbed and weathered village set in a rolling, rock-strewn hillsides, surrounded by murky and dangerous canals and dark pools... At times difficult to follow, but well worth it! The main character, Ruby, a bright 14 year old, reminds me of Scout (To Kill a Mockingbird) without the nurturing protection of Atticus Finch.

Lisa says

For me, this was "meh." At the very end when it all came together, it was surprising, but prior to that it dragged on a bit too much and didn't make enough sense for me to love it.

Rachel says

This novel belonging to the genre of magical realism, a genre I always find rather odd, was more interesting for me than is often the case for books of its kind. It was well written even down to the dialect spoken by the characters, but the characters themselves fell a little flat for me. I did like all the mysteries gradually being revealed throughout the story even though it was written *in medias res*, which annoys me every time I come across it. [Mini rant: I don't want to know even part of the end before I get there, much less to be told it at the beginning of the book and then be directly reminded of it in the middle! End mini rant.] Overall, I rather liked it, but due to its faults, I gave it three stars.

"This is the tale of Ruby Abel Tailor, who could not cross the water but dreamed of an easy plenty by the sea. This is the tale of three separated sisters--one witch, one mermaid and one missing--and how Ruby was caught up in between. And this is the tale of Cradle Cross, circled round with water, and how Ruby Abel Tailor learned to cross it."

Teresa says

In this, the author's debut novel, mermaids, myths and mystery are the order of the day. It is set in 1930s England, in the small town of Cradle Cross in the heart of the Black Country in the Midlands. Surrounded by canals, brimming over with superstition, Cradle Cross is like a prison for our narrator, 12 year old Ruby Abel Taylor. Ruby dreams of new horizons but her crabbed grandmother Annie has forbidden her to go near water after losing her husband and child to the sea so she's fated to lead a stifled, claustrophobic existence until one day Isa Fly comes to town. Isa, half-blind with a mane of white hair, becomes a scapegoat when things start to go wrong in the community - the workers at the local button factory are laid off and valued items start to go missing. Soon rumours of witchcraft are rife.

The author certainly knows this area like the back of her hand and the inclusion of Black Country dialect enhances the otherworldliness and the seclusion of this community which has lost so many of its menfolk during the war. Indeed the principal characters are all female and all strong-willed and determined, including the idealistic Ruby, the grief-stricken widows of the Ruth and Naomi Society, the worldly-wise Oxbridge graduate Truda Blick, the sinister black clad woman known as Blackbird who harbours a grudge against the charismatic Isa Fly.

On the one hand there is a lot going on in this novel and it took me until about a third in before I settled into it. There is no doubt that this is a well written, atmospheric novel with fairytale elements but I can't help thinking that a bit of judicious pruning and restraint would have created a sharper, homogeneous read. This debut shows a lot of promise and I look forward to reading more from Anna Lawrence Pietroni.

Chevelle says

Definitely glad I read this. The young main character makes for a wonderful unfolding of mystery and intrigue as the reader draws conclusions from stories Ruby dismisses as grown-up prattle.

However, I did not read Ruby as 14. In my mind she was maybe 9-or-10 (especially with her references to "the other children".) Her bright-eyed wonder and willingness to believe in everything and everyone did not strike me as 14-year-old behavior.

The author also has a frustrating habit of pulling away from the 3rd-person-limited to hint at the future and remind the reader that all is not as it seems. The narrative itself was intriguing and suspenseful on its own so these deviations were simply annoying. The author needs to have more faith in their own writing.

Certainly worth a read. The pieces fall easily into place and the constant revelation of new clues will leave you anxious to read on and keep unraveling the mystery.

Alberta Ross says

What a treat this was.

Ruby's Spoon is set in the Black Country, England, in the 1930s. To you from other climes do not let its English locale put you off. This is a story that could be placed in many divers' places. The use of dialect has added to the atmosphere helping to paint a graphic picture of life in a particular location and a particular

time. Pietroni has taken great pains to make it easy to decipher.

As a writer myself I found the fact that this was Pietroni's debut novel a trifle depressing - it is so good, so complex and the language hauntingly beautiful. Anna Lawrence Pietroni has conjured up a claustrophobia and bleakness that is atmospheric enough to swirl fog like off the page.

With detailed care she has created a collection of strangely beguiling characters, all complete with secrets, habits, histories and prejudices which will be stirred into a cauldron of mischief.

Although an apparently simple tale of a young girl dreaming of escape from a drear and claustrophobic situation, Pietroni has managed to fold the story into so many layers it's a treat to settle down and begin carefully unfolding and smoothing each subtle wrap.

Into hard grim lives, still traumatised by losses in the First World War and going down under the Depression that lies heavily across the fishing and the button factory, the two mainstays of the community, this is a community poised halfway between the old and new.

Rose feels trapped between the murky waters that wend through the landscapes and such is the writing the odour from those waters can make you gag. She plans her escape route from dysfunctional family and neighbours, and the chance meeting of a stranger Isa Fly opens up a new possibility. Be-friending Isa Fly Rose believes she has an accomplice whom she hopes will help her to achieve her aim.

However this is an isolated and closed community with strong links still to more ancient beliefs. The outsider, Isa, the stranger, becomes a scapegoat for all the ills that beset the community. Talk of witchcraft and spells soon creep through the watery mists. There is a fairy tale element, but not of the Disney ilk. This is fairy work, old style, deadly and untrustworthy. Many of the old themes weave their way through this narrative; mermaids, curses, myths and mysteries.

Ruby struggles through dark secrets and traditions. Through the superstitions of the older generations, as she finds herself drawn down dangerous paths. Ruby falls into danger as she struggles to save herself and her dreams, while attempting to save Isa and to reconcile the past and present.

What lifts this story from its 'grim up north' genre is the misty and dreamlike quality of the writing.

Anna Lawrence Pietroni has written an original novel in Ruby's Spoon and I am looking forward very much to reading more from her.

Geraldine says

"handkerchiefs as tokens of remembrance to fold away in scented drawers or keep under their pillows. A simple ox-eye daisy chain at first, around the hem, that entwined the next year with green ivy, and the next with rosemary. Amongst themselves they called it "losslinen" I liked this novel, the word definitions at each chapter, the language : I doe, wi yo, yoom, weem, wi it...

Zuzana Lechmanová Šamová says

pre m?a zbyto?ne dlhá, ale záver pekný

Debbie Zapata says

AMAZING...YOU MUST READ THIS BOOK!!

Edit on Jan 26 ~~

I have finished my re-read, Jan 17 to Jan 26 of 2017. This book will keep all five stars and my original gushy statement from 2014.

I don't want to say too much about it, but Ruby's Spoon covers two weeks in the life of Ruby Tailor, 13 years old and suddenly caught up in a swirl of unusual events surrounding the button factory that dominates her village's life, a woman who arrives on a mysterious mission, and Ruby's own tangled past. The book can be confusing; it is full of secrets being dredged up like mud from the canal. The reader learns about them when Ruby does, and understands all of her obsessions much better with each secret revealed.

Is our Ruby strong enough to survive what is put into motion the day Isa Fly comes to town? The day that was her personal J20?

"And looking back, Ruby knew this was when it started; the slow unraveling of all that she had held as sure and true."

Read it.....live it.....and find out!

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Edit Jan 17, 2017 ~~ I've been wanting to reread this for awhile. I have a challenge task asking for a book with blue on the cover, so I think now is the time! I am curious to see if my original rating will stand the reread test. And if I can come up with something else to say in my amazingly short original review sentence at the top. LOL

Originally read February 11, 2014 to February 15, 2014

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## **Marty says**

Who is Isa Fly and what is the peculiar power she seems to have over young Ruby Tailor, her friend the Captin and Truda Blick, last surviving owner of the local button factory in Cradle Cross, Black Country, England?

The close knit community, still reeling from the devastation of World War I, distrusts her as an unusual outsider (Isa is white haired, although she's only in her thirties, and has a cast over one eye.) Many come to see her as a witch. Motherless Ruby sees her as a chance to leave her lonely life behind, including an abusive grandmother who has a neurotic fear of water. Isa is looking, she says, for a missing sister and her mother,

whom her father abandoned in Cradle Cross before Isa was born. Good-hearted Ruby diligently tries to help find this lost half-sister while planning her escape to the sea with Isa.

Things, naturally, do not go as planned - Is Isa really whom she purports to be? Why do Trembly Em and the Blackbird seem to hate her so? And why are treasured personal items being destroyed or disappearing all over the town? Mixed into this volatile cocktail is the failing button factory, which employs a large number of the town's inhabitants - Truda Blick must call in debts and cut wages as she desperately tries to save her business. As hostility toward the young woman grows, Ruby finds herself endangered by her own family's secrets.

The tale may wrap itself up too neatly for some readers. In fact, many may guess the outcome three-quarters of the way into the story, if not before. But overall Pietroni does an admirable job of leading the reader down false paths and recreating the local dialect of this industrial part of England.

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### **Alison Mercer says**

This is a really original book, a dark fairytale with shades of Annie Proulx and a powerfully claustrophobic sense of place. It creates its own world, where fantasy and reality are fused. So Ruby, the likeable heroine, has to put up with a rubbish dad and works in a fish and chip shop, but gets mixed up with characters out of the realm of magic, with unpredictable and sometimes violent results. Set in the Black Country in the 1930s, and written with an insider's ear for the rhythms of the local dialect, it builds to a gripping denouement. There are strange and beautiful visual motifs too; the button shop, the loss linen embroidered by the mostly miserable and bereaved local women, and the sea that Ruby dreams of, even though she's never seen it.

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### **Jane says**

You really should meet Ruby.

You'll need to go back in time, to the 1930s, and then to Cradle Cross, a small landlocked town in England's Black Country. At least I think you do. Ruby's story is set in a world that is a little like that, but also like something from a different world entirely.

Her story begins at her workplace – Captin's Fried Fish bar. Ruby is peeling potatoes for chips when a stranger arrives. A very strange stranger. Miss Isa Fly, immediately recognisable thanks to her shock of white hair and her mirrored skirts – not your usual thirties attire. And she doesn't have a usual reason for arriving in town – she is seeking a missing relation, though that relation seems to be unknown in Cradle Cross.

Ruby comes from an unhappy family. She lives with her grandparent because her father as he has taken to living in his workshop on the canal and Ruby has been told that she must never cross the water. But Ruby dreams of the sea.

And Ruby is bewitched by Miss Isa Fly. Maybe it's because she tells stories of the sea, or maybe it's something more magical. They join forces and Truda Blick, the bluestocking graduate who has just inherited the town's button factory, is drawn into the quest too.



Many of the townsfolk don't like that and they suspect that Isa's arrival in town has nothing to do with a missing relative. And so there are incidents, revelations, and maybe a touch of magic. More than that it would be unfair to say. But I will say that, yes, Ruby's spoon is very important!

The story dances along, in lovely melodious prose. Clearly the author loves words and the sounds that they make. There is dialect, and at times it was difficult, but it works, it really does.

It's a remarkable debut novel - lovely, enchanting, clever and quite unlike anything else. And along the way it makes some very good points about the strengths and weaknesses of families, friendships and communities.

But I do have reservations. For me the third person narrator didn't quite work. It required far too much exposition and dialogue, and made the book a little bit too long for the story. If only the narration could have come from Ruby. The story would have been so much more immediate and just the right length. And I could have danced with the characters instead of alongside them.

But I'm still delighted that I met Ruby. She was lovely, her world was extraordinary, and her story was wonderful.

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## **Avid Series Reader says**

Ruby's Spoon by Anna Lawrence Pietroni is a stand-alone mystery set in 1933 in Black Country, England. Thirteen-year-old Ruby lives in Cradle Cross with her grandmother Nan Annie, on the hillside above town. She helps lifelong family friend Captin in his fish-and-chips shop, and delivers meals to her father Jamie, who lives and works at his boat repair business on the canal. Nan Annie has instilled into Ruby a deep fear of crossing water, due to family members lost to drowning. Ruby doesn't play with children her age; she cherishes an Almanac that was her mother's, in which Ruby updates lists her mother started, such as "What I Shall Take to the Sea". Ruby dreams of a pleasant life by the sea.

When a stranger arrives in town, presumably seeking a missing sister as her dying father's wish, Ruby befriends her, and takes on the responsibility of questioning all in the town. Ruby is mesmerized by Isa, and feels great comfort in her presence. Ruby believes that if she finds the missing sister, Isa will take Ruby with her when she returns to Severnsea. Captin is similarly charmed by Isa, and so is Truda, owner of the button factory, the town's sole employer. The rest of the town fears and despises strangers; they blame anything that goes wrong on Isa. Superstition rules their lives - hard to believe the events could take place in 1933; more likely a century earlier. Most town residents come to view Isa as a witch. Isa stirs up considerable trouble, urging Truda to lay off button factory workers and close the chip shop. The Blackbird, a woman who dredges the town's canal, accosts Ruby and demands information about Isa. Ruby remains loyal to Isa, regardless of events that make even Truda wonder what is Isa's true agenda.

The story very, very slowly develops many more details of residents' past lives, illustrating how tightly bound they are by superstition. Ruby wears a spoon charm around her neck that Isa gave her, that Ruby believes gives her strength and bravery to fight her fears. Bit by bit, Ruby gathers information, until she realizes Isa has fled to Cradle Cross. Ruby is so loyal to Isa, she plots with Truda to escape with Isa. The spoon itself is the key to long-hidden secrets.

Dialogue throughout the story is in the local dialect, which makes for slow reading. The town's canal is

evidently its sewer; Ruby frequently refers to the "cacky" stench of the canal. In one disgusting scene, she's tricked into falling into the canal, and coated with it.

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