



The Wolf Road

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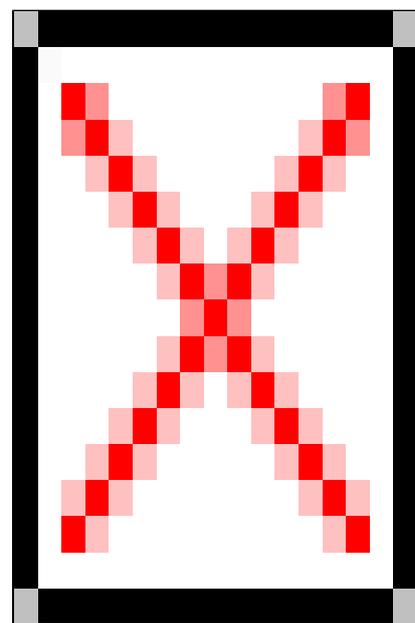
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5



?The road ran through the summer fields and we raced it like wild things.? With the novel?s opening lines, we join fifteen year old Lucas, enjoying the drive into town on a Saturday afternoon with his parents. A page later, he?s trapped in the overturned car, Mum ?hanging limp in her seatbelt above me?, blood dripping from her mouth. Dad lies crumpled against the driver?s window, ?his head bent at an odd angle?. Both are dead.

Within days he?s on his way from a secure life in Somerset to share an isolated cottage in the Lake District with Nan, his guardian; he?s met her briefly just twice ? she and his Mum rarely spoke. Adults mean well ? a therapist and that usually reliable character, the friendly English teacher - but cannot break through his grief and hostility. Getting into a car terrifies him. In class, the words of teachers or textbooks won?t string together to make sense. He?s violently bullied. At times, the language of Lucas?s narration is intense and original; this debut novelist, Richard Lambert, is a poet as well as an award-winning writer of short stories. But Lucas?s understanding of events and people is often restricted; his grief will not yet allow him to trust or share. To others, he can seem sullen and incommunicative.

He is haunted by an image of a wolf (or was it a wolf-like dog?) standing in the road before Dad had, fatally, swerved to avoid it. Lucas is in turmoil. When he strikes out on his own onto the fells, he knows the wolf is out there, waiting for him. There are, after all, confirmations in the media that a wolf is roaming the hills, slaughtering sheep.

His loneliness is not easily relieved. Nan is a lawyer, angered by what Britain has become. Though her mind retains its keen edge, she is tired, unwell, often misunderstood. Sharing her entrenched ways with an abrasive fifteen year old is exhausting; but over time, with no facile reconciliations or sentimentality, moments of contact are almost forced upon them. Then, importantly, there's Debs, daughter of a neighbouring farmer, in Lucas's year at the local comp. She too is a loner and a dreamer; and also a reader (Sylvia Plath, Emily Brontë, Ted Hughes). Lambert makes the growth of wary trust between them entirely credible.

Lucas and Debs both believe in the wolf. His belief is both literal and metaphorical; his relationship with the creature becomes inseparable from his own struggle with grief. Is he, like the wolf, a death-bringer? He's become so negative, destructive. Encounters with the wolf on the hills lead him to fear that he is its chosen victim; maybe the only way forward is to kill or be killed. For Debs, the wolf must be protected from the guns of the farmers and police snipers. The wolf needs the wildness of the fells; and the fells need the wolf. Through his friendship with Debs, coupled with his own courage, Lucas begins to cope with his desolate loss; and so to edge towards acceptance of his new life. Far from killing the wolf, he realises that he too needs to save it, if he is to save himself.

The Wolf Road offers an uneven track which is not always easy to follow. Readers may at times be unsure of the way. They may need to retrace the trail ? or sections of it - through a second reading. The 5 Star rating above is intended as a grateful welcome to an intriguing and challenging voice.

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