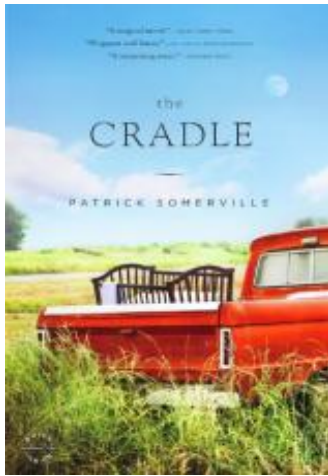


The Cradle

by Patrick Somerville



About the Book

Early one summer morning, Matthew Bishop kisses his still-sleeping wife Marissa, gets dressed and eases his truck through Milwaukee, bound for the highway. His wife, pregnant with their first child, has asked him to find the antique cradle taken years before by her mother Caroline when she abandoned Marissa, never to contact her daughter again. Soon to be a mother herself, Marissa now dreams of nothing else but bringing her baby home to the cradle she herself slept in. His wife does not know --- does not *want* to know --- where her mother lives, but Matt has an address for Caroline's sister near by and with any luck, he will be home in time for dinner.

Only as Matt tries to track down his wife's mother, he discovers that Caroline, upon leaving Marissa, has led a life increasingly plagued by impulse and irrationality, a mysterious life that grows more inexplicable with each new lead Matt gains, and door he enters. As hours turn into days and Caroline's trail takes Matt from Wisconsin to Minnesota, Illinois, and beyond in search of the cradle, Matt makes a discovery that will forever change Marissa's life, and faces a decision that will challenge everything he has ever known.

Elegant and astonishing, Patrick Somerville tells the story of one man's journey into the heart of marriage, parenthood, and what it means to be a family. Confirming the arrival of an exuberantly talented new writer, **The Cradle** is an uniquely imaginative debut novel that radiates with wisdom and wonder.

Discussion Guide

1. What does Matt mean when he tells Joe, "You're free," as they eat breakfast in the diner?
2. In your opinion, what is the significance of the cradle?
3. Renee's story occurs more than a decade after Matt's, and in many ways the two characters exist in different worlds.

How are their respective quests similar? How are their journeys different?

4. Why does Marissa cry on her wedding day?

5. Why do you think Matt rips the showerhead out of the wall?

6. In the novel's first chapter, Marissa claims, "There are two kinds of people in the world. There are people who understand that everything matters and people who don't understand that everything matters" (page 6). What does she mean by this? Is she serious? Use her statement as a way to think about the various characters in the book.

7. How is writing poetry different for Renee than her work writing children's books? Why do you think she struggles so much with the former, and how does that struggle change in the course of the novel? How does Renee's understanding of Walt Whitman's work play a role?

8. Matt comes to the realization that "the world never just happened but rather was made by people, each and every aspect of it" (page 157). How does this realization affect his sense of personal responsibility?

9. Who was the character you most identified with at the beginning of the novel? Did that change by the conclusion of the story?

10. Why do you think that, following Matt's return, Marissa never again asked about the cradle?

Author Bio

Patrick Somerville grew up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later earned his MFA in creative writing from Cornell University. He is the author of the story collection *TROUBLE* (Vintage, 2006), and his writing has appeared in *One Story*, *Epoch* and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He lives with his wife in Chicago, and is currently the Blattner Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Northwestern University.

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