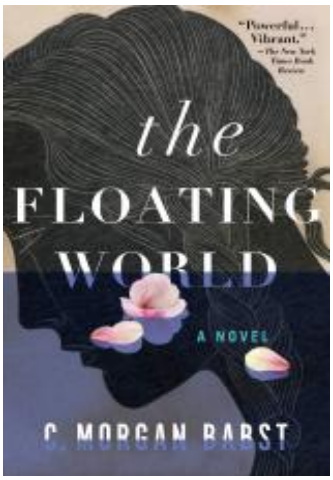
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The Floating World

by C. Morgan Babst



About the Book

In this dazzling debut about family, home and grief, C. Morgan Babst takes readers into the heart of Hurricane Katrina and the life of a great city.

As the storm is fast approaching the Louisiana coast, Cora Boisdoré refuses to leave the city. Her parents, Joe Boisdoré, an artist descended from freed slaves who became the city?s preeminent furniture makers, and his white ?Uptown? wife, Dr. Tess Eshleman, are forced to evacuate without her, setting off a chain of events that leaves their marriage in shambles and Cora catatonic --- the victim or perpetrator of some violence mysterious even to herself.

This mystery is at the center of Babst?s haunting and profound novel. Cora?s sister, Del, returns to New Orleans from the successful life she built in New York City to find her hometown in ruins and her family deeply alienated from one another. As Del attempts to figure out what happened to her sister, she must also reckon with the racial history of the city and the trauma of a disaster that was not, in fact, some random act of God but an avoidable tragedy visited on New Orleans?s most vulnerable citizens. Separately and together, each member of the Boisdoré clan must find the strength to remake home in a city forever changed.

THE FLOATING WORLD is the Katrina story that needed to be told --- one with a piercing, unforgettable loveliness and a vivid, intimate understanding of this particular place and its tangled past.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins with two epigraphs: one from the spiritual ?When the Saints Go Marching In? and one from Virgil?s "Aeneid." How did these lines inform your reading of the book? In what ways is the book like a spiritual? An epic poem?

2. Hurricane Katrina touches off the action in this story. Why, then, does the novel begin ?Forty-Seven Days after

Landfall,? and then dip back to narrate the storm itself 175 pages later? How does the novel?s temporal structure reflect the psychological state of the Boisdorés?

3. Cora is absent, in different ways, throughout the novel. How does her absence affect in the lives of the other characters? How does it pull the story along?

4. The hurricane opens up fissures not only in the levees but in the lives of all of the characters in the novel. What cracks already existed in Joe and Tess? marriage? In Troy and Reyna?s sibling bond? In Cora?s relationship with her parents? How do disasters unearth pre-existing flaws in our ordinary lives?

5. Which character do you think loses the most in the aftermath of the storm? Why?

6. How have Tess?s coping strategies backfired? Does her behavior make her a bad mother? A bad therapist?

7. Tess believes Joe is passive and weak. Is he? In what ways does he live up to her expectations? In what ways is he forceful and brave?

8. How are self-preservation and compassion at odds in the novel? In a disaster of such magnitude, is it possible to reconcile survival with morality?

9. Del?s relationship with Zach is both more and less intimate than she would like it to be. Why is this? Do you think Del?s fantasy at the end of the book --- ?their teenaged children [coming] back from the parades...carrying glittered coconuts in their arms? --- has a chance of coming true?

10. Ultimately Del returns to New Orleans while Cora leaves it. What differences in their personalities account their different trajectories? How have their divergent experiences of the storm caused their paths to diverge?

11. Vincent?s dementia prevents him from fully engaging with the storm and its aftermath. How do his voyages into the more distant past --- to get a pocket pie, to see his wife --- interact with the primary action of the novel. How is his memory loss similar to the losses caused by the hurricane?

12. What is the significance of Vincent?s hope chest in the novel? How is Del?s dedication of herself to cabinetmaking significant?

13. Vincent and Cora both wander through the city. What motivates their wandering? In what ways are these voyages similar or different?

14. Like the hurricane, Reyna?s mental illness and death drive much of the action of the book. What really happened to her? Is Cora in any way correct in thinking that she is responsible for her death? What underlying societal problems triggered this state of affairs?

15. At one point, Reyna says ?Help gets you fucked.? Is this just the raving of a madwoman, or do you agree with her? In what ways do the characters? attempts to help one another wind up hurting? In a disaster like Katrina, what can be expected of the rescuers and the rescued?

16. The chapter titles come from Dante?s INFERNO, Mrs. Randsell is reading a book about the Greco-Roman afterlife, and Cora is often described as a ghost or a corpse. In what way is Cora?s experience of the flood like a descent into hell? How is her resurrection accomplished?

17. Evacuation catalyzes many of the novel?s events. Is it braver to hold your ground in the face of a disaster or flee? As coastal cities are increasingly threatened by storms and rising tides, when is the right time to leave?

18. Trauma --- whether caused by natural or man-made disasters --- can trap us in a dangerous spiral, in which we can fail to truly escape the past. What are some strategies for moving on from tragedy? How can we begin to rebuild in the aftermath of a disaster?

Author Bio

C. Morgan Babst studied writing at NOCCA, Yale and NYU. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in such journals as the *Oxford American*, *Guernica*, the *Harvard Review*, *LitHub* and the *New Orleans Review*, and her piece ?Death Is a Way to Be? was honored as a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2016*. She evacuated New Orleans one day before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. After 11 years in New York, she now lives in New Orleans with her husband and child.

Critical Praise

?Set in New Orleans, this important and powerful novel follows the Boisdoré family...in the months after Katrina. A profound, moving and authentically detailed picture of the storm?s emotional impact on those who lived through it.?

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