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Alis

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Editorial Choice:

New Talent

Media type:

Book

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When Alis, soon to be 15, is told by her parents that she is to marry the 40-year-old Minister of her church, she is horrified. But Alis's mother is the Senior Elder of Freeborne, a small rural community with fundamentalist religious beliefs, and she cannot be prevailed upon to change her mind about something she believes to be the 'Maker's will'. Alis's elder brother Joel ran away to the city some years before and Alis now determines to join him. She finds a way of travelling to the next settlement, Two Rivers, where she encounters a cowed community in the grip of even stricter fundamentalists than those in Freeborne who use their power to inflict horrific suffering on those considered sinners. But there are some dissenting voices and Alis is eventually helped on her way to freedom.

This is a novel of powerful undercurrents which Rich sketches in with a deft hand ? from a bullied woman's suggested bulimia to the intense attraction between Luke, a rare independent spirit in Two Rivers, and Alis. These rural communities are convincingly depicted with much satisfying detail about domestic tasks, herbal medicines and so forth. The religious bigotry and fear that pervades them bring to mind Arthur Miller's **The Crucible**, about the Salem witch hunt of 1692. And just as Miller's play is an allegory about the fate of those brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in the 1930s, it seems that Rich's novel has something to say about girls in our contemporary society who are forced into marriage against their will in the name of religious or cultural obedience.

With rather too many coincidences, credulity falters from time to time in what is otherwise a well structured tale ? once found, Alis's brother is rather easily disposed of; birthmarks are not usually hereditary although accepted as proof of parentage at a key point in the plot. But, quibbles apart, this is an impressive debut with a strong authorial voice.

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