

Maureen O'Brien. *B-mother*.  
Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2006.

With four adopted children in my extended family, I've often wondered what makes a woman go through the trials of pregnancy and childbirth if she doesn't want to keep her child. And if she does want and love her child but has to give it up, how does she live with that soul-wrenching decision? I imagine that, by leaving her own perfect infant in a stranger's hands, she must feel doomed to being shunned or forgotten or, at best, to being a second-rate b-mother (or birth mother) to the vaunted a-mother (or adoptive mother). How can anyone recover from that?

In Maureen O'Brien's debut novel, *B-mother*, Hillary Birdsong finds a way. At the age of 12, her older brother Bird's senseless death trips a string of losses, like a row of falling dominoes. Hillary's idyllic childhood in Maine collapses as her grief-stricken mother turns Bird's room into a shrine and her father turns silently inward in his sadness. In this broken family, Hillary is neglected and grows wild. By age 16, she goes on joy rides with boys and ignores her curfew. Yet her parents, cocooned in their own grief, don't notice Hillary's acting out and cries for attention.

When Miles, a glamorous boy from New York City, vacations in her small town, he gives Hillary the attention she craves. She thinks she has found the love that had been missing in her life and loses her heart to him, along with her virginity. Then when she becomes pregnant, she loses him, too. He doesn't want to marry her and sends her money for an abortion. However, she decides to have the baby after hearing its heartbeat on an ultrasound.

At first, Hillary keeps her pregnancy a secret, except from her best friend Shell. When it's too late for an abortion, she tells her parents she is pregnant, hoping they'll help her raise the child. They don't want her to have the baby because of the shame it would bring them. Hillary's mother is particularly embarrassed and says to her husband, "The whole town is going to think our daughter is a whore. She's making our family look like trash." Although Hillary desperately wants to keep her baby, she soon

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realizes that she couldn't make ends meet on her income alone as a 16-year-old. Under duress, she agrees to go to La Rosaria, a Catholic home for unwed mothers, and to put her baby up for adoption.

At La Rosaria, Hillary struggles through meetings with potential adoptive parents, each pair more like Barbie and Ken than the next, and she begins to despair of finding a family where her child would be well-loved. She doesn't want her child to "grow up lukewarm, with name brand everything and impeccable manners." Then she meets James and Lola Vining. In oversized black eyeglasses, vintage clothes, and handmade jewelry, Lola is taller than her down-to-earth husband in his flannel shirt and jeans. Yet Hillary knows they're the ones when she sees them holding hands in the restaurant where they meet. "When they unlocked their fingers, he poured two sugar packets into her coffee for her." In this tiny action and others, Hillary sees that they love each other deeply and believes they would give that same love to her child.

As soon as Hillary gives birth, she faces the loss of her son with whom she bonds instantly in the hospital. "I didn't want to stop holding him, feeling his dark peach fuzz tickling my face. I had only forty-eight hours. If I was lucky, maybe seventy-two." After that time, she becomes the b-mother instead of the real mother she had wanted to be.

Fortunately, Hillary has chosen a good adoptive mother. Lola sends Hillary a letter and photo every year on their son, Tom's, birthday. Hillary lives from letter to annual letter. In between, she learns to cope with her grief and begins the long recovery from her many losses, which occupies the rest of the book. Lola's letters are the critical pegs on which Hillary hangs her biggest hope: meeting her son when he turns 18 and playing some part in his life.

Hope is not the only thing that balances the losses and steers the story far from sentimentality and morbid sadness. O'Brien's lyrical writing brings the story to vibrant life, as bittersweet and aching tender as the real thing. The winter after Bird's death, for example, Hillary makes snow angels on his grave every day and plays an audiotape on which she accidentally taped him calling for her. She plays it for months just to hear his

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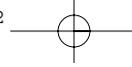
voice. "One day the little wheels churned, and a long, shiny brown strand knotted up . . . I couldn't hear him calling to me anymore."

The author also reveals the emotional truth of her story with unflinching honesty. Although Hillary is about to become a mother and faces many mature and sobering decisions, she is still just a teenager making the awkward transition from girl to woman. While at La Rosaria, Hillary talks longingly about the high school prom when Shell visits, and dances the bump with other pregnant girls, their "bellies bouncing off one another like sumo wrestlers." O'Brien also shows that there are moments of grace in every life, no matter how difficult. When Hillary is trying to decide if she could give her baby to James and Lola, "A strange image flooded me: my baby napping in a wicker bassinet. I sensed breath just barely puffing out the baby's nostrils. Then I heard the sound of snaps on a tiny pair of overalls and pictured Lola's hands." With that, her decision is made.

O'Brien's characters are captivating. Even minor characters have a rich life. For example, the Man in White, "an old lunatic who wandered all over the county in starched button-down shirts, white trousers, and white dress gloves" cleans the headstones in the cemetery and befriends Hillary. Even the mother of Hillary's college roommate is fully realized. "An emaciated woman in black slacks and diamond tennis bracelets, . . . She moved like a two-legged spider outside the gallery and lit a cigarette with what looked like a solid gold lighter, with a flame as big as a blowtorch."

In *B-mother*, places are as well-drawn as the characters. Hillary prefers Southeast Maine's "sugar maples . . . speckled with salmon leaves" and even its "river that frothed yellow foam from the paper mill" over New York City's "Steel girders and concrete walls . . . spray painted with messages in an unfamiliar alphabet I didn't understand. Vowels with snow-capped tops, consonants burning, names on fire."

This emotionally rich novel answered a lot of questions for me. In it, O'Brien explores Hillary's soul-shattering decision to give up her child for adoption as well as the long, difficult path by which she learns to forgive herself—and the parents who forced her into that decision. Perhaps not surprisingly, love is the key to understanding both the decision and the



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later forgiveness for it. Although Hillary's recovery from being branded as a b-mother may not be typical of every woman who gives up a child for adoption, it is completely credible and illuminating.

Through her feistiness, persistence, and hope, Hillary Birdsong earns every ounce of redemption in the satisfying ending of this novel. And through her lyrical writing and rich characters, Maureen O'Brien earns the respect and gratitude of her readers.

*Nancy Priff*

