

Adrienne Celt. *The Daughters*. W.W. Norton/Liveright, 2015. \$24.95.

Folklore and oral traditions are the heart of Adrienne Celt's debut novel, *The Daughters*—both from a broad perspective, and more specifically—as it opens with a prelude about the *rusalka*, a water nymph from Slavic mythology. While, like many myths, the *rusalka* contains many variations, Celt's *rusalka* sings while dangling naked from the trees, seducing men with a kiss, only to drop them back to earth, dead. But this isn't a heartlessness on the part of the *rusalka*, nor a base lust on the part of the man—there seems, in both, a moment of love, of caring, no matter how fleeting, no matter how much they know they cannot have each other, still, they try.

These handed-down stories and their variations form the crucial foundation for *The Daughters*, which traces five generations of women as they become mothers and daughters, and the lore of the curse that they carry—that with the arrival of each new daughter, the mother must lose something.

We begin with Lulu, a renowned opera singer who hasn't been able to sing a note since the birth of her daughter, Kara, leaves her with an injury to the abdomen. As Lulu deals simultaneously with the emotions surrounding her inability to sing, and those of her newfound motherhood, she contemplates the family history that brought her to her current predicament. Is this loss of her talent more than temporary, she wonders: is it the newest manifestation of the family curse?

The woman responsible for the family curse is Greta, Lulu's great-grandmother, who lives on through the vivid story-telling of Lulu's grandmother (often referred to as *babenska* or *baba*), Ada, who also serves as Lulu's primary guardian after Lulu's alcoholic and cantankerous mother, Sara, walks out on them when Lulu is nine.

Throughout Lulu's adolescence, Ada shares Greta's life in piecemeal bits, each more enticing and fantastical as the last, then retells and retells them, making Greta more than just family in Lulu's eyes, but like some kind of legend with whom she shares DNA. "Everything about me depends on Greta. That's what Ada told me, what she needed to be true."

Greta, living in Poland on the brink of World War II in a house of all men (her husband and their three sons), can't help but feel as though something is missing: a daughter. A daughter she once had a premonition of on the night she met her husband, but that hasn't come to life: Greta's baby daughters all meet their demise, while her sons live on. After giving birth to a fifth daughter who doesn't survive past infancy, Greta is in the woods one day to bury her child, when she comes across a strange man who offers her a deal. "I take a few things that you don't need," he offers vaguely, and in return promises Greta a baby girl. She never sees the strange man—purportedly the devil—again, but does eventually give birth to Lulu's grandmother, Ada.

It's this longing for a daughter that ultimately ties the women of *The Daughters* to the rusalka fable of the prelude. For while the men in their lives are merely present—for biological necessity if nothing else—it's their daughters that truly test the limits of their sacrifice, their love. "There is Kara to contend with," Lulu considers, "and instead of wanting to take something from her, I'm afraid of all I want to give."

And give, Lulu must. In the wake of Kara's traumatic birth, baba Ada collapses, dead, leaving Lulu as the lone family representative at Kara's

impending christening, where she is supposed to continue the family tradition of singing “each new girl into life,” a task Lulu isn’t even sure she can physically perform anymore.

Scared of the family curse and mourning Ada, Lulu contemplates reaching out to her estranged mother, Sara. Remembrances of their tumultuous relationship often spring from Sara’s hostility toward the family’s oral tradition, and determination not to uphold the romantic illusions of Greta and of history that persist in baba Ada’s renditions: “The stories my mother told weren’t meant to instruct or entertain me. They were meant to destroy something. Meant to infect.”

The mystery found in the flexibility in these folktales and what is or isn’t concealed by them is what drives us to keep turning *The Daughters’* pages, trying to find the answers to questions even when we know they might never be found, or might instead be hidden in plain sight. Did Greta truly make a bargain with the devil, or is the truth something simpler, more human? The dueling sensibilities of baba Ada’s mystic telling and those of Sara’s harsher views seem to be continually pitted against each other. “I didn’t see Ada’s stories as lies, but some part of me knew that their truths were separate from the truth of the war offered up by my mother. They felt, in my hands, like two sides of history.” But Celt suggests that perhaps together, they form a better whole than either version could on its own: “The truth lay, as it so often does, between the two stories. In the cracks and crevices where they seeped into one another.”

The infusion of Polish history, fables, and other cultural touchpoints brings extra life to these women and their world, and much like the folktales *The Daughters* pays homage to, Celt’s prose feels timeless, thoughtful, but not contrived, from the smallest details of a room, where cushions “have unseen depth, like everything,” to the very sounds contained in the names of the women. Lulu’s is the only first name in the family that lacks the “ah”/“uh” sound that seems to be the trademark of the other women in her genetic tree—Greta, Ada, Sara, Kara—perhaps a nod to Sara’s prickly nature, and her lack of any special regard for her ancestors.

If there’s anything that weighs down *The Daughters*, it’s that there’s so little happiness to be found in its pages to balance out all of the unease and the tragedy, save for a few fleeting moments Lulu shares with Ada or with Kara. But, perhaps, in this regard too, *The Daughters* is more akin to a fairytale—and the happiness is what comes after the end.

—Taylor K. Long