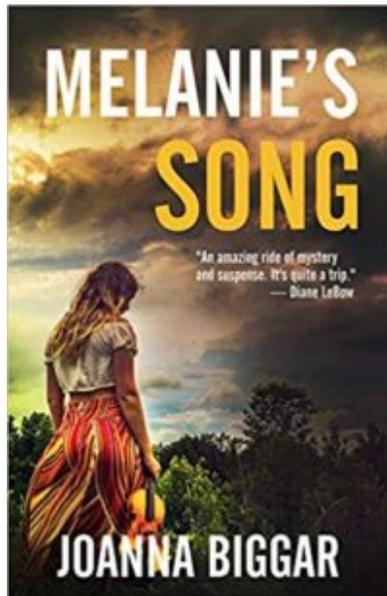


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# A Review of Melanie's Song by Joanna Biggar

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It is of course a truth universally acknowledged that of all possible story arcs devised since the beginning of time, the hero's journey is the most successful one, etcetera, etcetera. In Joanna Biggar's *Melanie's Song* we have something like such a heroic journey featuring an intrepid and tenacious female reporter in

California who, having lived in Paris with close Francophile college girlfriends after graduating, takes it upon herself to investigate and find out the truth about the disappearance and presumed death of one member of that charmed circle and female community, the eponymic Melanie Hart. J.J. Rocher, a sort of modern day Mercury with wings on her heels, or at least on her doughty Datsun, is the heroic traveler and seeker of *Melanie's Song*, but what distinguishes Biggar's novel from the

traditional hero's journey narrative and in fact makes it more satisfying and significant is that J.J. undertakes a hero's journey not for her own self-realization or salvation, but for the sake of a companion and a soulmate, thus foregrounding through the very structure of her novel the feminist foundation and framework of J.J. Rocher's journey to the underworld, so to speak.

*Melanie's Song* is a sequel to Joanna Biggar's first novel, *That Paris Year*. Biggar is a fiction and travel writer who co-founded the international travel writers' workshop and has written for *The Washington Post*, *Psychology Today*, *The International Herald Tribune* and *The Wall Street Journal*, among others. A consummate artist of the written word, Biggar stuns the reader of *Melanie's Song* with an evocative paean to women and women's solidarity in seventies America, articulated in the tale of the deep friendship of a set of college women who are dreamers, pioneers and seekers, all of whom identify through their bond with each other as much as with their natal families. It is no small feat to keep in line and on their toes the nearly twenty characters in the novel who all play varied but significant roles in this emotional saga of women's friendship (told like a Chandlerian whodunnit), but Biggar interweaves the parallel and intersecting stories with such finesse and assurance that the reader isn't lost for a moment. Woven amidst these intersecting and connected parallel narratives, though, is the central thread of mourning and seeking Melanie Hart, the most fragile and soulful one among the friends, whose life seems to have ended mysteriously and tragically. It is the emotional grist and frisson of this search for a lost loved one

that makes the peripatetic movements of several characters in the novel — spread across different callings and in different places — converge into a praise-song to women's love and friendship that bypasses a dominant hetero-romantic plot.

It is no wonder that one of Biggar's passions and avocations is travel: her ease with characters almost constantly on the go, and her fantastic yet lyric evocation of strange places where people appear and disappear is strong proof of this. I have rarely read a writer who is as skilled at conjuring place and zeitgeist with a light touch. As mentioned, in this case it is the zeitgeist of the seventies in the United States. Biggar's description of bodies, faces, hair, clothes and other accoutrements, houses, forests, roads, mountains and oceans creates the reality effect that is a distinctive mark of the modern realist novel, but these detailed vignettes of places, people and things also bring to life characters who collect things: J.J.'s grandmother, her mother Annie, Jocelyn the Hollywood star, Ivan Bloomberg the loyal and reliable male friend, Eve the politician's wife who becomes a nun and nurse in Africa, Alice the empathic supervisor and guide in J.J.'s office, and of course J.J. herself collect garden delights, exotic artifacts, an array of headgear, letters, information and strategy, and papers relating to Melanie Hart respectively. Zeitgeist is expressed therefore as a tapestry of memorabilia, signatures and collectibles that are crucial to the themes of *Melanie's Song*: remembering and forgetting, history and memory. And as the plot and movements of characters in *Melanie's Song* bear the imprint of a tapestry of private citizens' personal lives, family histories and secrets, events and archives, the background of

this tapestry is nothing less than the equally imposing panorama of America in the seventies complete with Woodstock, Martin Luther King Jr., racial tensions, civil rights movements and activists, hippies and dropouts, drug use, burgeoning feminist consciousness and the tenacious relics of the fifties and early sixties. To tackle this swath and scope of material — private and public stories — is the mark of a writer who is attempting nothing less than an epic.

Also important is the title of Biggar's novel containing the word "Song," because music of every variety is everywhere in the novel and indeed the titular Melanie's song is a classical composition by Melanie's brilliant but "toneless" musician husband Hans in her memory, one that fails to capture even a bit of the true spirit of Melanie for those who knew her really well. In returning again and again to music, Biggar captures the zeitgeist of an era of tremendous cultural, social and political upheaval in American history, but it is as if the faint trace of remembered music runs through all the clashing weapons and beating drums of those culture wars to remind the reader of what matters most to the protagonist(s): beauty and friendship.

Technically, the combination of letters and first and close third person voices through which the story is told both relieves monotony and allows intimate glimpses into the lives of characters who may not be the "hero" of the story/journey like J.J., but who are close to her and important to Melanie's story. They are important for the story to develop not as a vainglorious "solving" of a mystery, but as a story of community and women's friendships. A small but exquisite trope must also

be mentioned here. If the quintessential themes of *Melanie's Song* are memory and history, as I've suggested above, the conceit of Melanie's grandmother's advancing dementia and memory loss illuminated by spells of great mental acuity and perfect recall would seem to serve a useful and witty function in metaphorizing the pacing of the story as remembrance and amnesia working together in piecing together the story of Melanie and the remembrance, ultimately, of things past.

Joanna Biggar is a marvelous storyteller, and *Melanie's Song* is an unputdownable, riveting feat of storytelling.



**Nandini Bhattacharya** has been writing fiction — mainly short stories and novels — for several years. She has received residencies and fellowships at the Bread Loaf Writers' Workshop, the Sarah Lawrence Summer Writers' Workshop, the Southampton Summer Writers' Conference, The Voices of Our Nation Arts Writing Workshop, the Cambridge Writers' Workshop in Paris, and the Vermont Studio Center (July 2019).

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