

*Summerwater*, Sarah Moss (2020, Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

A number of Scots and English people have rented (or own) vacation cottages beside a loch north of Glasgow, at the end of an unpaved one-lane road ten miles from the highway, with no telephone reception. It's been pouring the whole week and everybody is on edge, and what's worse, a woman in one of the cottages has been having parties with loud music that has kept almost everyone else awake all night long.

This is the opening situation of Sarah Moss's extraordinary novel, which follows the thoughts of most of the characters throughout a single day, starting at dawn with a mother out for her daily run and ending late at night with a young boy on the outskirts of the catastrophe.

For there is a catastrophe. It involves the woman responsible for the invasive parties, a "foreigner" who is still here with her little daughter, despite Brexit. But the power of the novel doesn't come from its almost nonexistent plot; it comes from the author's penetrating picture of each person's mind: the elderly self-satisfied doctor and his wife, some rebellious teenagers, a number of children (one only four years old), several mothers and fathers, a young engaged couple, a spoiled young girl. One hilarious chapter follows the thoughts of the young woman having sex with her fiancé. Another, in a tour de force, follows the doctor's wife as she enters dementia unawares. A disturbing chapter is devoted to the cruel, self-preening daddy's girl. The voice in each character's head has a different style, and each family relationship is different. You know these people. The portraits show up the characters in run-of-the-mill novels as the flat, single-colored things they are.

Beyond the characters, drenched in their personal concerns, lies the natural world surrounding the cottages, and beyond that, our shared present of climate change, economic worries, wars, famines, and refugees. The characters are fleetingly aware of these worlds from time to time. Short descriptions of the natural setting appear in front of each chapter. The writing is wry, vivid, precise, sometimes lyrical.

The novel is just 202 pages long. In my opinion, it's one not to miss.