

May 2022

## Book Review: The Reckless Kind

Ragini Mishra  
*Banaras Hindu University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Mishra, Ragini (2022) "Book Review: The Reckless Kind," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss1/14>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

***Book Review: The Reckless Kind***<sup>1</sup>

Ragini Mishra<sup>2</sup>

With her debut book, *The Reckless Kind*, Carly Heath adds to the discussion of queer and gender roles in society. This book is best characterized as juvenile historical fiction. Set in 1904, Muskoxx Hollow, Hestaland, the story follows the teenage trio of Asta Hedstrom, Gunnar Fuglestad and Erlend Fournier in their processes of defining sexuality and friendship with the support for each other. All the central characters in the book suffer from some disability.

With her white forelock and deafness in one ear, Asta Hedstrom has long been subjected to neglect. She suffers from Waardenburg Syndrome, a condition that Heath mentions in the notes at the end of the book. Heath stresses the significance of a woman's appearance in that era. Asta's unconventional looks result in a social and family-base indifference towards her. In the early twentieth century, women had negligible opportunities for employment, especially in rural areas. The only means to sustain themselves was through matrimony. They were expected to accept wifhood and motherhood as primary vocations. The possibility of securing a marriage proposal was limited for Asta because she doesn't fit in with the beauty standards of the time. Heath delineates the gender disparity prevalent highlighting how wifhood comes with de facto ownership by husbands. She highlights the patriarchal oppression in Asta's interactions with her fiancé, who wants her to be grateful to him because he has proposed marriage to her.

Heath develops Asta's character from that of a meek and mild young girl to an independent female farrier who can sustain herself on her own. Her rejection of married life has a feminist appeal as she says, "He should've known by now a wife wasn't what he needed, and wifhood wasn't what I wanted" (p. 217). Like the Shakespearean heroines who cross-dress, Asta defies gender norms as she gets rid of her skirt to don the trousers. The only difference is that she wears men's clothes not to disguise herself as a man but as an independent woman whose adamant about earning a living and looking after herself.

The intense relationship between Gunnar and Erlend leads to many moving scenes in the book. Their relationship is seen as sodomy and is condemned by the townsfolk. Heath's description of the verbal and physical abuse targeted against them can be at times disturbing. Through her description, it is not difficult to comprehend how challenging it must have been for them to continue their illicit relationship in the given time.

Heath has used the family name of "Fuglestad" to symbolise rebellion. In the middle ages, any practice that deviated from Christianity was labelled "pagan". The Fuglestads are pagans because of their different beliefs and practices. They are treated as outcasts for not paying church visits. Heath argues against the negative connotation of the word "pagan" as she contrasts religious fanaticism with the pagan virtues embodied in the Fuglestad family. The people of the town consider Gunnar's disability as a punishment for his past sins and for misleading two Christians

---

<sup>1</sup> Heath, C. (2021). *The Reckless Kind*. New York, New York: Soho Teen an imprint of Soho Press, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Ragini Mishra is an English Literature major at Banaras Hindu University. Her areas of interest are gender studies, folklore, and mythology.

Email: booksandsilvertongues22@gmail.com

from the right path. This victimisation leads Gunnar to self-blame for everything that goes wrong. The acceptance of being distinct from everyone else forms the essence of this book.

Heath lightly touches on the issue of mental health as she describes Erlend's anxiety. Despite having a privileged background, he's not content with his life. He seeks material objects as a means to express his feelings towards his loved ones. Erlend's theatrical prowess as a director and his exit from the theatre is like an artist undergoing an exile. He strives for perfection not only onstage but also in real life. He tries to put things together but, in the process, is himself torn apart by his impulsive decisions. The estrangement with the society further aggravates his anxiety as Asta rightly points out, "Melancholia was certainly a common trait amongst those of us who were outsiders" (p. 140). No matter how hard they try, they'd always be considered outsiders within their communities. And this alienation from society leads to melancholia or anxiety. Asta, Erlend and Gunnar are all social misfits who challenge the social conventions. As the title suggests, they are reckless in their actions and disregard any restrictions that come in their way.

The language used in this book is simple and lucid. The use of politically correct words to address disabled people has been controversial. But Heath has been careful and sensitive in avoiding the use of any ableist language. There is no explicit reference to the disabilities keeping in mind the language of the period in which the book is set. She describes them in the notes at the end of the book. The book is divided into three parts; each chapter begins with the point of view of the three characters. There are many intertextual references to Shakespearean plays. Heath uses several unseen characters to develop the plot further. But these characters, at times, fall prey to a fragmented and disjointed narration.

Despite this shortcoming, the book remains insightful. Addressing the multifaceted themes of disability, queer relationships, and feminism, Heath offers a fresh perspective on disability studies and gender studies, accessible to a variety of audiences.