Praise for Bonnie-Sue Hitchcock

SHORTLISTED
CILIP Carnegie Medal
UKLA Book Award

LONGLISTED
Guardian Children's Fiction Prize

'A captivating debut by an exciting new author.'
Guardian

'Intoxicating . . . will resonate with readers of all ages.'
Publishers Weekly

'Gorgeous.'
Spectator

'Reaches through the mêlée of voices in YA;
its smell, or scent, fresh and alluring.'
Independent

'An exceptional coming of age novel.'
The Sunday Times, Book of the Week

'The power of the writing is extraordinary.
I, for one, smell prizes ahead.'
School Librarian

'A piercing look at life lived at 40 below.'
FT

'Ambitious and original, this transports the reader
effortlessly both in time and space.'
Metro

'A singular debut.'
Wall Street Journal

'A work of beauty.'
School Library Journal

BONNIE-SUE HITCHCOCK, author of *The Smell of Other People's Houses*, was a long-time journalist for Alaska Public Radio and prior to this spent many years fishing commercially, raising her children on a boat. She was born in Alaska and lives there still in a yurt with moose wandering through her backyard, a yurt that was lucky to escape the wildfires of 2019.

Bonnie-Sue says: 'I'm so excited for readers to experience these small towns and their quirky, complex characters. When the world is on fire, we need each other more than ever.'

EVERYONE DIES FAMOUS IN A SMALL TOWN

BONNIE-SUE HITCHCOCK

faber

Content Note: One of the many story strands in this novel is connected to sexual abuse (not graphic), which may be a sensitive issue for some readers.

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To those who do not know that the world is on fire,
I have nothing to say.

Bertolt Brecht

Angry Starfish

Gina pushed the metal snow shovel across the ice, carving a path that she and Poppy could then skate on. Well, if Poppy would quit whining and get her skates laced. Somehow Gina had gotten roped into taking her dad's girlfriend's kid to the pond. She'd only relented because it was minus twenty outside and Poppy had looked horrified at the idea. Her dad's getting a new girlfriend had given Gina's anger a whole new lease on life.

Until recently, she'd thought it had been waning, but mostly it just smouldered inside her rib cage. It was exhausting, being herself, fighting so hard all the time. She had been almost ready to just give up and let it all go. 'Moving on' was what her counsellor called it, and Gina wondered if she meant they should pack up and leave town, start over somewhere that did not remind Gina so much of her mother.

Instead, the girlfriend, Libby, had arrived with her cute little daughter, and *poof!* It was as if someone had thrown kerosene on Gina's smouldering briquettes of

anger. She could feel the flames leaping, the heat licking her sternum. On really cold days, it was almost nice.

'Sure, I'll take Poppy over to the pond to skate,' she heard herself say. 'We could even hitch Alpaca up to the sled and have him pull us over.'

Alpaca was their oldest husky – her mother's favourite – and the trip would take twice as long with him. Gina smiled smugly to herself, thinking of her otter-fur mittens that never let the cold get anywhere near her fingers. Poppy's, she'd noticed, were down and Gore-Tex, no comparison to animal skins.

Her dad, though, had smiled at Poppy and said, 'You know, I think we have some of Gina's mittens from when she was little that you should wear. And I'll put the caribou hide in the sled so you stay toasty warm.' Then, to make matters worse, he'd even given her the fur hat Gina's mother had sewed while her hands were still able to pull the needle through the stiff leather on the inside.

That was a long time ago, before the disease had attacked her mother's joints. By the end it had kept her from even writing her name. Gina wished she could forget the image of her mom's bent fingers gripping a stubby pencil as if her life depended on signing her name one last time. That image was all Gina had left, unless you counted a father who would move on with another woman and smile sweetly at that woman's

daughter. Maybe he thought Gina was a lost cause because she had read a book through the funeral, refusing to look at anyone or anything, especially the casket. She hadn't known what else to do.

All she had really wanted was for someone to tell her it was okay to fall apart, but nobody did.

The disease was the reason her mom had stopped harnessing up the dogs to go to the corner store, the same one that Gina pulled in to on the way to the pond while Poppy sat in the sled, talking to herself.

'What did you say?' Gina asked, stepping off the runners to tie Alpaca to the post.

'I was talking to Elizabeth.'

'Who's Elizabeth?'

'She's my best friend. She's right here.' Poppy patted the empty seat beside her.

Gina blinked at Poppy and felt her lashes sticking together, moisture freezing them in tight crystals. She put her fur gloves over her eyes for a couple of seconds until the crystals melted and she could prise her lashes apart. But Poppy was still all alone, sitting in the sled.

She had overheard Libby telling her father about Poppy's invisible friend. 'We think it's her way of coping . . .'

But then they'd noticed Gina standing in the hallway. Libby put on a fake smile and changed the subject.

Gina refused to ask her father anything, preferring instead to ignore Libby's appearance in her life because ignoring things was Gina's superpower.

She really didn't care if Poppy had invented a friend to fix whatever she needed to 'cope' with. Gina had her own things to deal with and didn't appreciate having someone else's kid dumped in her lap. Or her dogsled.

'Whatever,' she said. 'Stay here. I'm going to get a treat for Alpaca.'

Inside she walked toward the wooden wine barrel full of dog biscuits that sat in the middle of the room. Honestly, the place was nothing more than a log cabin pop-up store that catered to locals, so dog treats were the best-stocked item, followed by Twinkies, motor oil, herring bait in the summer, and assorted whiskeys all year round. The prices were ridiculous, though. Who needed a toothbrush bad enough to pay ten bucks for it? Her dad had carved her one out of a carrot once, telling her to make do until they could go to the bigger store in town, where things were much cheaper.

Just pushing open the door and walking inside had made Gina miss her mother so much she thought she might have to sit down. Would she ever not be overwhelmed by this place? It was one of her oldest memories, them coming here together on the sled. But it was such a long time ago she felt silly that her legs still reacted this way, going all wobbly beneath her.

Before Gina had been even Poppy's age, her mom had stopped putting her on the caribou skin in the bed of the sled and stopped laughing at the way Gina hid her face when the poop came flying out of the dogs' butts as they ran, her little head just at the right height for the smell to come wafting back into her nose.

Gina had loved it when the sled had swung up onto the snowbank, and she'd leaned side to side, afraid to fall out but also not, because she could hear her mom's crisp, high laugh saying it was okay; nothing bad could happen to her while they were together.

And when they got to the store, Oliver, the owner, who had the spikiest whiskers anybody had ever seen, would give Gina a hot chocolate and she'd melt her eyelashes over the steam. Then she'd ask for an ice cream, and everyone thought that was hilarious, which made Gina feel like she'd said something clever, but she didn't know what.

'Why, hello there,' a voice said somewhere behind her shoulder blades, knocking her back to the present and making her turn around, hoping to see Oliver smiling at her like the Ghost of Christmas Past.

But Oliver had died years ago, and this new version of him was thinner, way more clean-shaven. And he was smiling at someone else.

Poppy had followed her inside, even though Gina had told her to wait in the sled.

'Elizabeth was cold,' Poppy said to both the man, who was already handing her hot chocolate in a Styrofoam cup, and to Gina, who looked like she wanted to throttle her.

'We aren't staying long enough for hot drinks,' Gina said, aware that nobody was pouring cocoa for her. 'And there is no Elizabeth.'

'She didn't mean that,' said Poppy to the empty air beside her. The man smiled at the space just beyond Poppy's right ear and genially played along. 'Hello, Elizabeth. Would you like some cocoa too?'

Poppy giggled. 'She's a mermaid,' she told the man, blowing on her drink. 'Her tail was starting to freeze outside, so I brought her in. When she warms up, she can grow legs, and then she can ice-skate with me and Gina.'

She smiled at Gina as if they were best friends. The man seemed to find all this incredibly charming. Gina wanted to barf.

'My niece runs a summer camp down on the Peninsula,' he said. 'Maybe come summer, you and Elizabeth would like to go for a week or two?'

Why would anyone pay money to be in the outdoors? Gina wondered. Then she worried that maybe she'd said it out loud.

'You could make some friends. Maybe Elizabeth would meet some other mermaids too,' he added.

Oh, for God's sake.

'We should get going,' said Gina. 'What do we owe you for the cocoa?'

He waved his hand in the air, batting her question away.

'Mermaids and lovely young ladies always drink on the house.'

Gina grabbed Poppy roughly by the shoulder and dragged her out the door. She noticed that Poppy's right hand was determinedly clutching the air, as if Elizabeth would be left behind if she let go.

'I would appreciate it if you listened when I told you to stay put,' she hissed.

'But Elizabeth needed to thaw out her tail.'

Gina untied Alpaca as he nuzzled her hand for the treat. She turned back to see Poppy climbing into the sled and then lifting the air with both hands and setting nothing into the seat next to her. She gently wrapped the caribou hide around the empty space, whispering into the cold air so her breath looked like cartoon bubbles hovering over her head. 'It's okay. If your legs don't grow back in time, you can keep your tail tucked under this hide and sit in the sled while we skate.'

Alpaca started to pull them forward and then loped into a run, making Gina squint into the cold, gratefully feeling her eyes begin to tear as they picked up speed.

The only thing she could appreciate about Elizabeth just then was that Alpaca was unfazed by the extra passenger.

At the pond Gina threw on her skates, grabbed the shovel, and set off to clear the ice. For all she cared, Poppy could catch up or she could just sit there and keep talking to Elizabeth about rainbow houses and cotton-candy pillows and whatever the hell else nonsense the girl was on about.

Gina glided out onto the ice and felt the connection of the frozen water beneath her metal blades. She'd been skating all her life, and the movement itself was a welcome escape from her overworked brain. She leaned into it with everything she had, floating across the pond's surface as she cleared herself a path.

She didn't know how long she effortlessly skated and shovelled, skated and shovelled, skated and shovelled, like a meditation – until Poppy's voice slowly reached her out on the middle of the pond.

'Gina, my hands are frozen. I can't get my skates on. *Help!*'

Goddammit. Poppy was still sitting in the sled, her stocking feet wrapped in the caribou hide.

What the hell do you know about frozen fingers? Gina thought, pushing away the image of the pencil, the mangled claw like a chicken's foot clutched around it.

She skated backward over the path she'd just

created, dragging the shovel behind her. Gina was an expert at skating backward, almost as if her feet had known that life was going to look better in reverse and somehow she could manage it more smoothly in retrospect. Her knees slightly bent, she flowed across the ice like butter melting in a hot skillet, her blades etching curvy lines into the crust of the pond – the sound, calming her down, helping her forget. Until she got back to where Poppy sat.

'Why did you take your damn mittens off?'

'They're too big,' Poppy whined, her eyes wide on Gina's face, as if she thought Gina might explode. Well, it was certainly possible.

Gina threw off her own mittens and threaded Poppy's laces through the holes with lightning speed. It would take only seconds for her hands to freeze, too, so she had to be fast.

'Okay, quick. Get your feet in there.'

Poppy's feet looked round, like an elephant's, in four pairs of woollen socks, one of which Gina's mom had knitted her years and years ago. She closed her mind to keep out any image resembling knitting needles and long, slender, healthy fingers.

'Greta says you remind her of a starfish,' Poppy was saying.

'A what?'

'A starfish.'

Gina had forgotten that Greta and Poppy were cousins. Greta was a few years older than Gina, but they often tried out for the same dance parts, and the competition between them was historic. In truth, since Greta was older and the better dancer, it hadn't made sense for Gina to get the better parts, but Greta missed a lot of rehearsals fishing with her granddad every summer.

If Gina worked hard, she often landed roles that should have gone to Greta. Gina had been so competitive and maybe more than a little smug about it. But that was before.

After her mom died, Gina had simply been cast in the lead roles and nobody said anything anymore about tryouts. It bothered her, but if she complained, then what? Would someone ask her to talk about how she felt? She hated that they gave her the cherished leads – pity roles? – and then stared sympathetically at her while she danced.

In a small town, you are forever defined by the worst thing that ever happened to you.

And just like her mother dying, she didn't know how to stop it.

'How am I like a starfish? That's ridiculous.' She thought it might have something to do with the word 'star' being misapplied, but Gina was surprised as Poppy ploughed on, unaware that she might be

treading dangerously close to the thin ice that was Gina's temper.

'Greta says starfish are actually bad.'

'Well, isn't Greta just an expert on everything.'

'No, I mean bad for the fishermen. Starfish eat the bait off their hooks.'

'How is it that I'm eating anyone's bait?'

Gina had no idea where this was going. And it was getting cold sitting in one spot.

'Poppy, we have to skate. We're going to freeze.'

'Okay.'

Poppy wanted to hold her hand and Gina knew it, but she skated off before that could happen. Backward. She watched the younger girl struggle to get her stride in Gina's old skates, which were too big despite all those socks. The beaver-skin hat kept slipping over Poppy's eyes, so every two seconds she had to push it up again. The girl was drowning in animal fur. What would Libby say if Gina brought Poppy back as a wriggling beaver and said she didn't know how it had happened? Maybe Libby would be furious and never come back to their house. Gina wouldn't mind if Libby stayed away, especially at night.

She hated thinking of Libby in her mother's bed, changing the smell of the sheets and pillows. She didn't care what her father did with Libby; she just wanted

him to do it somewhere else, because she was starting to forget her mother.

The sheets had always smelled like lavender and mint and wet dogs. Bits of dog hair clung to everything because the washing machine was full of dog hair, so even clean, all their laundry was furry. But once Libby had started staying over, the sheets smelled more like coffee and chocolate and some flower Gina couldn't identify.

Sometimes Gina sat in her mother's closet and breathed in her clothes, which was like sitting in a bog near ripe, low bush cranberries, because her mom had spent so many hours picking that smashed berry juice permanently saturated her sweaters and the knees of her jeans. But that too was slowly fading; it had already been over a year. As long as there was a hint of mouldy cranberry emanating from that closet, maybe her mom would never really be gone.

'Wait up, Gina!'

Poppy skated clumsily, chopping at the ice as if her skates were axes. Gina slowed and made lazy figure eights, waiting for her. When Poppy caught up, Gina relented and grabbed the girl's hands, hoping to pick up the pace. 'How am I like a starfish?' she asked, wishing she didn't care.

Poppy was panting and holding hard to Gina's wrists. 'Well, if you chop a leg off a starfish, it just

grows back. And if you chop it in half, it will grow two bodies.'

Gina stared at her. 'So?'

'Well, Greta said the fishermen who are green – you know, the new ones? They don't know this. When they pull the gear up on their lines, if the hooks are full of starfish that ate all the bait, the fishermen get so mad they chop up the starfish and throw them back overboard. But instead of solving the problem, they've just doubled it.'

'I still don't follow.'

'She just said that you're so angry, you're like a starfish. You chop off one bit of your anger and then it grows back, twice as big.'

Gina was livid that Greta was talking about her as if she could possibly know what Gina felt. She dropped Poppy's hands so hard her mittens fell to the ice, leaving the little girl's fingers exposed and throwing her so off balance that she toppled onto her butt, her bare hands flat against the frozen pond. Poppy started to cry, but Gina skated off toward Alpaca and the sled, leaving Poppy to crawl around on her own to find her mittens.

It was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, and Gina realised it was already getting dark. Off in the distance, a flash of colour glistened across the snow. Alpaca had suddenly pricked up his ears and taken notice. Perhaps it was some kind of hare or ptarmigan; if so, he'd be after it like a shot.

Gina had unhitched him from the sled, which he seemed to have only just realised as he started to run, untethered, toward the shadow that every once in a while glinted against the white backdrop. She tried to untie her skates but her hands were too stiff, giving Alpaca a good head start, and he would not listen when she called. She shoved her feet into her snow boots and chased him, still clutching the snow shovel.

The snow got deeper in a hurry, making her plunge through the top crust, slowing her down, and still all she could hear was Poppy's ridiculous little voice telling her that she was a starfish. Her anger exploded. It grew a leg, and then another leg, and then a body.

She could feel her angry starfish body growing bigger and bigger, and suddenly she was swinging all her starfish arms and legs, now numbering in the twenties, the thirties, the forties. She was a starfish monster swinging at everything in her path. The whole world seemed to be screaming, egging her on, louder and louder as she swung her pointy arms again and again and again.

And then she was lying on her back – the screaming had morphed into deathly silence – while all around her the snow glistened with colour. Shards of red and purple and glassy green were everywhere, as if a rainbow trout had flopped around, scattering its lovely scales. As her eyes adjusted, she realised it was just the

aurora reflecting off the white, white snow. She had been the one doing all the screaming.

Gina was so tired. Her shovel lay next to her, still gripped tightly in her otter-skin mitten. She saw it as if from a distance and tried to let go, but her hand had become a claw; she couldn't flex her fingers. For the first time she thought about how much pain her mother had been in. What a relief it must have been to be free from an earthly body that would not do what it was intended to do.

I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, Gina said to no one and everyone, but mostly to her mother, who was maybe one of those stars blinking overhead, and then finally to Poppy, who had made her way over all on her own, miraculously dragging the sled by Alpaca's empty tug line.

Frozen snot covered Poppy's face, and her eyelashes were caked with ice from tears that had frozen before they could fall.

Finally Alpaca came back and curled up on one side of Gina as Poppy curled up on the other, and they huddled there, slowly warming themselves against each other's frozen bodies.

'Poppy, are your hands okay?'

Above them, the lights changed from the green of a mallard's head to the soggy grey-green of pea soup.

'They're cold,' said Poppy.

'Put them under my coat,' said Gina. 'I can thaw them out.'

'It's okay. Elizabeth is holding them.'

Gina rolled over and looked at Poppy's hands lying at her sides. They were two balled-up fists clenching the empty air.

'Well, Elizabeth can still hold them if you warm them on my belly. She doesn't have to let go.'

'Okay.' Poppy sniffed. 'She'd like that.'

Gina helped Poppy get her frozen hands out of her mittens again. The little girl's fingers were turning white, and Gina braced herself for the icy touch against her stomach. She carefully covered them with her shirt and then her coat, trying not to press on them too hard with her own mittened hands. *Please be okay, please be okay.*

'I should have never left you on the ice like that,' Gina whispered. 'I'm sorry, Poppy.'

'It's okay,' said Poppy. 'Elizabeth was there.'