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Review by Mindy Friddle

Tolstoy Lied: A Love Story

By Rachel Kadish

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Tracy Farber, the 33-year-old American literature professor in Rachel Kadish’s novel, *“Tolstoy Lied,”* is convinced that famous adage, which opens Tolstoy’s *“Anna Karenina,”* needs to be challenged. She intends to do so, but only after she is granted tenure at the New York City university where she teaches, since “talking about happiness is career suicide.” Meanwhile, she avoids romance (“dating emptied me out”) and spends her days reading and teaching. “A life mining the ore of literature. It’s not as airless as it sounds,” she tells us. And while she spends her evenings in sweatpants watching figure skating on television with the sound off, Tracy claims she is, “happy in my own way.”

Enter George, a new love who will challenge Tracy’s assumptions, or at least get her off the sofa and out for Chinese food. Their relationship gallops along, heady and charged, and a little too quickly for Tracy’s taste. While George, a Canadian and former Fundamentalist Christian estranged from his rigid father, proves sensitive and adoring, he pushes for commitment. He even offers to convert to Judaism. More disquieting is the alien notion he drops casually one day--something about men as breadwinners and women having “a special role” in families: “Career is great. So long as a woman isn’t so ambitious she puts it ahead of family.” Whoa. Tracy proposes they get to know each other a little more before making any big commitments, although George reminds her that she tends to “overthink” issues.

Tracy’s friends aren’t much help in their offers of conflicting, confusing advice about love. Unfortunately, this too-familiar cast of characters—the gay friend, the single woman, and the married, pregnant friend—doesn’t offer much originality for readers, either. Neither do Tracy’s parents, who emerge as undeveloped characters, even in the scenes in which her mother dispenses covert advice about marriage (“Sometimes you have sex more often than you feel like it”), or when her back-slapping father hovers over George approvingly.

Kadish has a way with comic lines, however, and her sly pokes at academia provide laugh-out-loud moments: “For three weeks I sat in a graduate school seminar on ‘Moby Dick’; no one mentioned the whale. I

circled job listings.” And then there are Tracy’s humorous asides: “The most well-known four words by an American poet were penned by beatnik Lew Welch, who supported himself with a day job in advertising. ‘Raid Kills Bugs Dead.’ ” Fortunately, such wit makes up for the clunkers that appear in the novel’s more serious moments: “A grin breaks on George’s face like a tsunami.” Or, when Tracy holds a newborn: “The startling rapid pulse in the silky skull tattoos my palm in reward.” Huh?

The author also has a knack for pacing, and provides a tense narrative even in the last section of the novel, when a happy ending would seem assured. Or would it? The subplot—of academic subterfuge and a wicked, scheming colleague, who like most villains in literature, fascinates—deepens this literary romance and keeps the pages turning. Too bad the present-tense, first-person narration seems, at times, rushed. After all, the present tense is a questionable choice by the author, especially under the weight of Tracy’s existential dilemma. Yeah, I know. Contemporary novelists love the *immediacy* of present tense, (“I am furious at myself. I pass the butter.”) Maybe it’s my hankering for Tolstoy, but a ruminating narrator seems better served by the distance of time—to reflect, to obsess, to put the pieces together.

“Anybody who tries to take happiness seriously is belittled,” Tracy says at one point in the novel. “Or worse, they’re called ‘romance writers’—the literary world’s highest insult.” What, I wonder, would Tracy think about her own appearance as a protagonist in a modern literary romance novel? A book in which the question--Will she or will she not get her man?--is accompanied by the added complication: Will she or will she not be granted tenure? Surely the heroine deserves happiness—a career and a love life wouldn’t hurt, either. For those who prefer that their novels of thirty-something heroines seeking romance include some heft and charm, “Tolstoy Lied” is the book for you. This isn’t chick lit. This is lit chick lit.