

# The Almost Moon

## Alice Sebold's second novel will surprise fans of *The Lovely Bones*

BY LAUREL MILLS

*The Almost Moon*, Alice Sebold's follow-up novel to the best-selling *The Lovely Bones*, tells the story of a woman who, after a lifetime of being surrounded by mental illness, kills her mother in a fit of finally-realized rage. The novel follows Helen, a middle-aged model who poses in the nude for art students, as she struggles in the aftermath of her murderous decision. Helen hides her mother's body in a freezer, seduces her best friend's son and attempts life as a fugitive, all the while revealing pieces of a difficult and almost vicious childhood that was largely defined by her mother's agorophobia and extreme selfishness.

While the book is good, as an originally-reluctant-reader-turned-adamant-devotee of Alice Sebold, I can't help but be disappointed in the shortcomings of this sophomore effort.

When it comes to books, I'm a bit of a snob. The mere mention of Dan Brown makes my skin crawl, and while I love *A Walk to Remember* as a film, you will never see me plowing through a Nicholas Sparks novel or reading *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

For this very reason, I tend to be scared off by any book that is a best-seller. When I hear the word, I immediately think of Stephen King's psychopathic clowns or Danielle Steel's torrid lovers. And, while there's nothing wrong with getting lost in a good page-turner, any time I'm tempted to pick up something that has the potential to be made into a movie-of-the-week, I feel the disapproving stare of the English teacher who taught me to love *Anna Karenina* and the poems of Gerald Manly Hopkins.

(Also, regardless of whether it's true or not, my

self-declared status as a book snob allows me to think that I'm smart. And, on the days when my checking account is overdrawn and I have to call someone from the produce aisle because I don't know that a scallion and a green onion are the same thing, recognizing good books is my only saving grace.)

I stayed away from *The Lovely Bones* for months solely because of that dreaded "best-seller" moniker.

Yet, having finally given in and silenced my inner snob, I came to love, love, love *The Lovely Bones*. After reading the first chapter, I was hooked, and I couldn't put the novel down until around 3:30 a.m. when I finally turned the last page and commenced a half-hour-long sob-fest. I cried for the tragedies of life – for grief and longing and pain. But, I also cried for the resilience of the human spirit – for hope, love, healing and even miracles. Even looking back at that sentence, I feel cheesy, but remembering how I felt the first time I read the book nearly brings me to tears again.

*The Almost Moon* presented an entirely different challenge to me – part of me was thrilled that one of my favorite authors had a new book, the other part dreaded what I feared could only be disappointment. You see, I feel that most writers only get one great book. Zora Neale Hurston had one *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (which I loved), but I had to put down *Mules and Men* after the second chapter. Some may argue with me on the work of Pat Conroy, but there will never be another *The Prince of Tides*, and I'd put money on college classes being assigned to read

that novel in a hundred years, long after the other books are forgotten.

This is in no way meant to be a criticism – I also think that writers are lucky if they get that one great book. As someone who aspires to one day write something more than 700 words long, I would trade all of the good books I could produce for that one great book. And, if I were Harper Lee, I never would have written another word after *To Kill a Mockingbird* either. I probably just would have spent the rest of my days thanking the universe that I wrote such a phenomenal story in the first place.

So, for all that I admire about the writing of Alice Sebold, it seemed to me that lightning probably wouldn't strike twice with *The Almost Moon*.

And, in my opinion at least, it didn't.

Just as in *The Lovely Bones*, Sebold's language remains beautiful and brilliant in its scarcity and insight. One of my favorite lines from *The Lovely Bones* is, "At fourteen, my sister sailed away from me into a place I'd never been. In the walls of my sex there was horror and blood, in the walls of hers there were windows." In *The Almost Moon*, a misguided sexual conquest is described in these terms, "He saw sex and experience. Through my own clouded perceptions, I saw, when I looked his way, the last vestiges of grace."

But, the hope and sense of connection Sebold's characters found in *The Lovely Bones* is nowhere to be seen in *The Almost Moon*. Here, we accompany the narrator on a rapid descent through her crime, its aftermath and even the



# THE ALMOST MOON

*a novel*

## Alice Sebold ▶

By the author of **THE LOVELY BONES**

unraveling of her sanity. We are unable to help ourselves, unable to escape and have no sense of impending resolution or of a light at the end of the tunnel. We are trapped with the narrator in an insufferable house where the weight of our past and our own choices is suffocating.

In *The Lovely Bones*:

These were the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections — sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent — that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous body had been my life.

In *The Almost Moon*, “She lay there, silent and broken, and I thought of the horror that had finally come with control.”

Rather than hope, Sebold gives the reader horror this time around, and the overall effect is less provocative and illuminating as it is uncomfortable and sullen.

In the end, Helen imagines her epithet as “she lived someone else’s life,” and it is hard not to agree.



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