

Rosetown

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BEACH LANE BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



BEACH LANE BOOKS

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020

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Book design by Irene Metaxatos

The text for this book was set in ITC Century Std.

Manufactured in the United States of America / 0418 FFG

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rylant, Cynthia, author.

Title: Rosetown / Cynthia Rylant.

Description: First edition. | New York : Beach Lane Books, [2017] |

Summary: In 1972, Flora Smallwood, nine, copes with her parents' separation with the help of her friends, Yury and Nessie, a new pet, and the familiar routines of life in Rosetown, Indiana.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017023378 | ISBN 9781534412774 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781534412798 (e-book)

Subjects: | CYAC: Friendship—Fiction. | Family life—Indiana—Fiction. | City and town life—Fiction. | Books and reading—Fiction. | Indiana—History—20th century—Fiction. | BISAC: JUVENILE FICTION / Girls & Women. | JUVENILE FICTION / Social Issues / Friendship.

Classification: LCC PZ7.R982 Ros 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017023378>

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Wings and a Chair Used Books was where Flora Smallwood's mother worked three afternoons a week. Inside, it had a purple velveteen chair by the window for anyone who wanted to stay awhile, and Flora, who sometimes felt quite acutely the stress of being nine years old, and sensitive, loved this chair. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were her favorite days because of it.

The owner of the shop was Miss Meriwether, a tall woman with deep black hair pulled tightly into a ponytail. Miss Meriwether told Flora that in her

younger days she had been a free spirit but that one day she'd decided to grow up and open a shop.

Flora tried to imagine Miss Meriwether as a free spirit, but it wasn't easy, as the words "inventory" and "bottom line" sometimes floated through the bookshop air as Flora sat reading. But Miss Meriwether did like long flowery skirts, so maybe she was still free in her heart.

Flora's family had been through a time of sadness, for their old, loving dog, Laurence, had passed away one spring night while everyone was sleeping. They all knew Laurence was fading. But no one believed, really, that he would ever not be with them anymore. Especially Flora, who had held onto his collar ever since she took her first steps.

But he did: he left them. And since then the idea of a new family pet sometimes had been mentioned. Yet never followed through on. Everyone was, in some way, still holding on to Laurence's collar.

Flora was an only child, and her parents were, for now, living in separate homes. The challenges of this, of course, were many. And there was the

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practical challenge for Flora of having two homes, with her own bedroom in each, for since most things do not come in duplicate, often the one thing she needed right that minute was not in this home, it was in the other. Sometimes the thing was not that important, as in the case of her green scarf or striped coat. But sometimes even something small like that—a scarf or a coat—suddenly felt so vital to her, and she felt a great sad longing because it was not in this home but the other one.

Flora's father, Forster Smallwood, worked for the Rosetown newspaper, *The Rosetown Chronicle*, and he was, Flora thought, a nice man, a good father, and a lost soul. She was not sure why she thought he was lost. Maybe it was the look she often saw on his face, that look that detached him from wherever he was and whatever he was doing and put him somewhere else. Maybe Neptune.

But he was a good father and a good photographer, too. He often allowed Flora to stand with him in his darkroom to watch a photograph slowly come into being. Standing under the red glow of

the darkroom light, Flora watched the blank photographic paper bathe in the pan of chemicals. And then the formerly invisible face of a person would begin to materialize on the wet paper, his features becoming clear and strong, like a ghost who has suddenly found teeth and eyes and ears and put them on.

Both Flora's father and mother had been very troubled by the war in Vietnam, and now American soldiers were being withdrawn from the fighting. Rosetown, Indiana, in 1972 was like any other small American town, its citizens sharply divided over the war and what it all had been about. Flora's father once told her, when he was in a dark mood after the evening television news, "You were born into an angry world."

But then he had smiled, as if he realized how harsh this might have sounded, and he added, "Thank goodness you showed up just when we needed you."

It seemed to Flora that the purple velveteen chair by the window in Wings and a Chair Used Books

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was more important than ever these days. Laurence had passed on. Her scarves and coats were confused.

And fourth grade at Rosetown Primary School was so very different from third.