Culture
Book Reviews
News
Arts and Media



Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* takes place in a convent in the Australian outback during a plague. The novel has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. (Unsplash/Mario La Pergola)



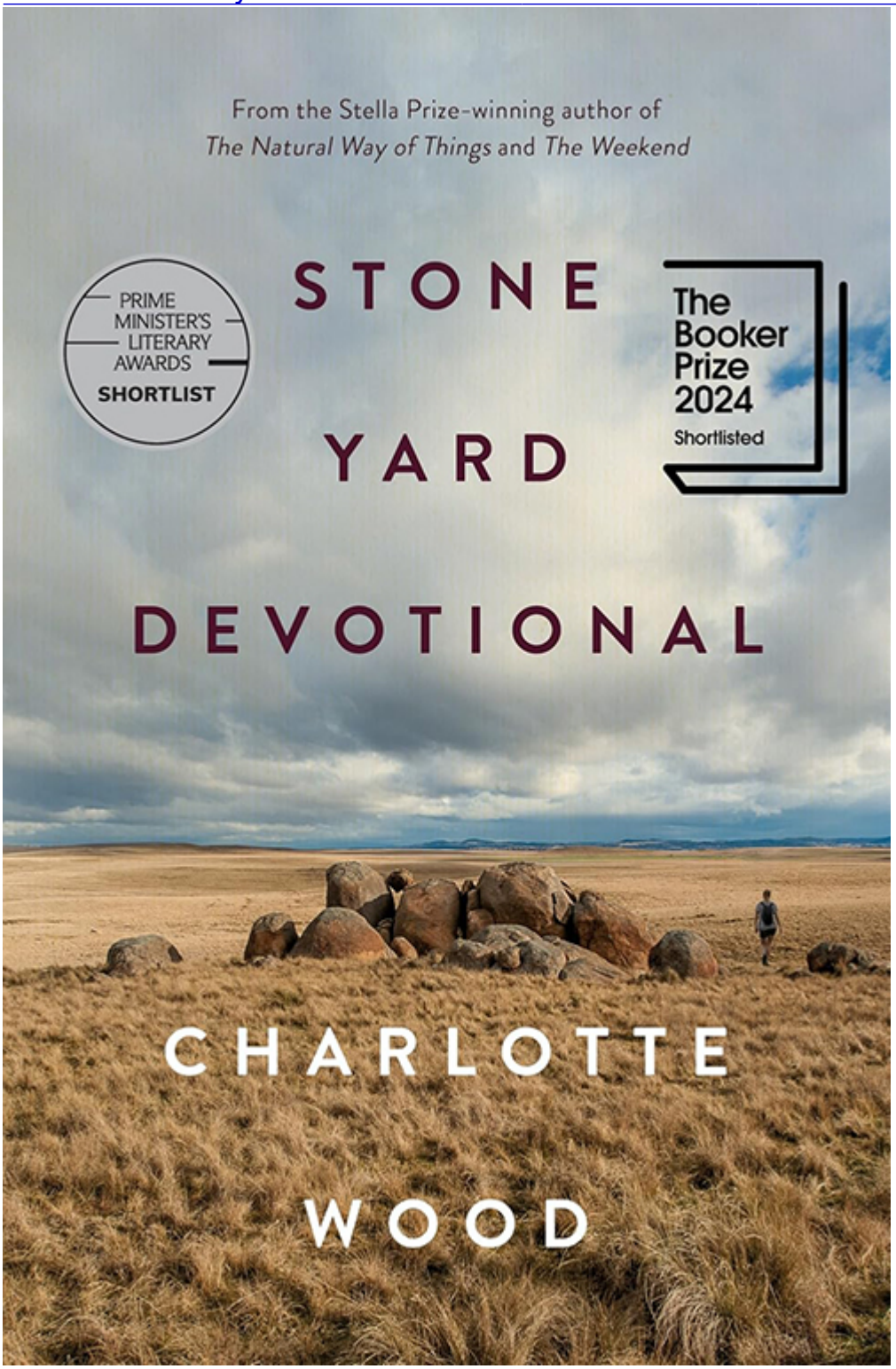
by Renée Roden

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Stone Yard Devotional
Charlotte Wood
297 pages; Riverhead Books
$28.00

There is a plane of existence where daily worries — using the bathroom, paying the bills, winning popularity — evaporate instantly.

The protagonist of *Stone Yard Devotional* recollects a moment on that plane: a 5 a.m. trip to the hospital with her husband as he struggled to breathe. It's a story many humans have lived some version of, adrenaline's clarity blazing a path through a crisis moment: this is what we have to do to stay alive.

This plane of existence is prior to, and deeper than, rational thought. It is fundamentally physical, animalistic. And yet it is the milieu of spirituality, which proposes that we arrive at the bedrock of existence and discover that we are not alone — some greater force is with us.

Charlotte Wood's *Stone Yard Devotional* takes place both on this existential plane and in a convent in the Australian outback during a plague. The novel's brief allusions to masks and travel restrictions conjure up memories of the COVID-19 pandemic and creates an ominous bassline for the infestation of mice scampering through every square inch of the convent.

Australia did, in fact, endure a mouse plague of biblical proportions from the spring of 2020 to the winter of 2021. Wood illustrates the horrors of death through this omnipresent horde of mice: a nest in a piano, a body in a shoe, the snap of traps minutes after they have been set, and the pile of mouse corpses accumulating until a mass grave must be dug with a bulldozer.

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Stone Yard Devotional was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the most prestigious award for fiction published in the United Kingdom or Ireland. Like several of its fellow shortlisted novels, Stone Yard Devotional examines the fragility of living in a world where waste is a luxurious illusion.

When the narrator of Stone Yard Devotional arrives at the unnamed convent in the Australian outback, she is distressed by cellophane wrapping. Although admiring of the solemn serenity and meaningful rhythm of the sisters' lives, the fact that meals are frequently distributed in single-serve packaging disturbs her. Just trash, she frets, destined to clog up landfills. "Surely if God exists, he could not approve of all

this rubbish," she thinks.

Mice have been a stand-in for humans in scientific research for centuries. Here, they represent the vectors of human consumption. They cannot help but consume and consume and consume until they have nothing else to cannibalize but each other: they eat through plastic and wood — and then gnaw each other's faces. Mice, in their destructiveness, waste nothing.

Life lived in the shadow of death is a life stripped down to the bedrock, a doctor tells our narrator. Death — of mice, of humans — provides the novel's antiphon. As the community seeks to stem the unending tide of mice, as they wait for frost and winter rain to spell the end of the plague, they also wait for an opportune moment to bury the bones of a slain nun that lie in prolonged state in their parlor. As the bones wait, the community confronts the limits of empathy and our own blindness toward the suffering of others, even those with whom we share an ecosystem.

The novel also contemplates those other bedrocks of existence — mothers. Mothers who give us life, who wound us, and who often inspire our first act of transcendence: forgiveness.

> The community confronts the limits of empathy and our own blindness toward the suffering of others, even those with whom we share an ecosystem.

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A young novice is drawn to the convent, despite the sins of nuns around the world who buried illegitimate children in Ireland and buried Indigenous children at residential schools in North America. Despite her distaste for the corruptions of the Catholic Church, the novice is drawn to the community, to her own bemusement, to partake in the bedrock of life. "In the contemporary world, this kind of stillness feels radical. Illicit," she says. "The silence is so thick it makes me feel wealthy."

In the psalms chanted by the small community of contemplatives, the novice discovers the rhythm of this existential realm. She sinks, blissfully, into the soothing rhythm, and steps through their threshold into a different mode of encountering the world. The psalms fascinate her: both with their ecological focus and with their anger and vengefulness.

Our narrator ponders the beauty of the unpolluted night sky. These routine riches of being alive — a peaceful blanket of quiet and the rich vastness of the starry heavens — have become a privilege rather than simply the rhythm of existence. We live among the mists of daily life and miss the bedrock. But the cloister bares life, and, when we see the shape of life clearly, we see how close death is to it.

On that plane of existence, stripped down to life or death, forgiveness is not an option presented by our animal instincts. But forgiveness becomes perhaps the most tangible sign that there is something else here with us.