

THIS HEAVY SILENCE: A NOVEL BY NICOLE MAZZARELLA. PARACLETE PRESS (BREWSTER MA), 2005. 253 PP HC \$21.95.

Dottie Connell, the protagonist of Nicole Mazzarella's new novel, *This Heavy Silence*, is not an easy woman to like. A hard-working farmer who loves her land above all else, Dottie doesn't have the time or patience for other people, kind words, or most types of love. The challenge of raising her best friend's orphaned daughter fails, for years, to open her to love. But this challenge does not fail her forever, and it carries us to a conclusion that is of the best sort: bittersweet.

Dottie's main cross in life seems to be her largely self-induced isolation. When

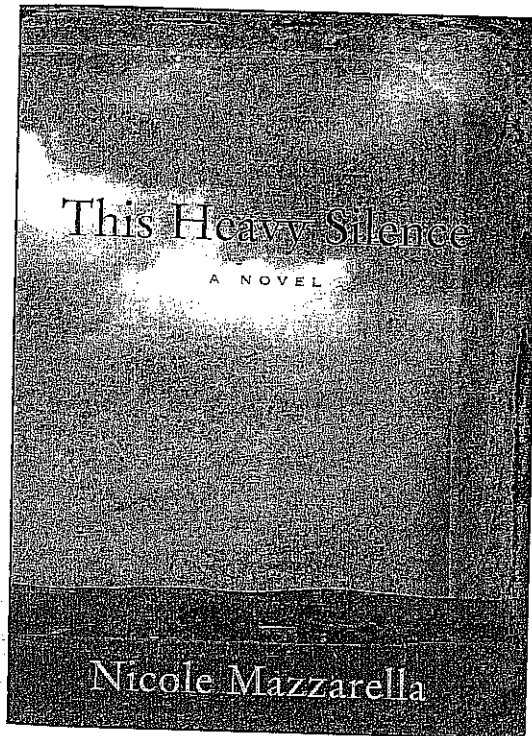
she was young, the man she was engaged to married someone else; decades later, Dottie is still alone and bitter. This is partially understandable. She is a single woman trying to run a farm in the 1960s and '70s, in a community of conservative people who generally don't know what to do with a strong woman. But Dottie cannot blame her isolation wholly on her time and place, or even her past. She has some very good opportunities for enriching her life, opportunities for love that she allows to pass her by. This is heartbreaking to witness, and a great credit to Mazzarella, who does not give her protagonist an easy way out of the life she's chosen. She does not try to save her, or spare her the pain of her decisions. Mazzarella treats her

protagonist as an individual of consequence. She treats her with respect.

In *This Heavy Silence*, we get a respectful and realistic portrait not only of stubborn loneliness, but also of farm life in the Ohio valley. Mazzarella's details are physical, sensory, dead-on, and her sentences are confident and lean. Although sometimes her sentences struck me as a little too lean, and although sometimes a particularly enigmatic line sent me on a wild goose chase, I admired the clean, spare prose. The novel's sense of inevitable loss will stay with me for a long time.

Mazzarella is from Lexington, OH.

Bev Hogue



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