

The Hired Girl,' by Laura Amy Schlitz

By Lenora Todaro

Nov. 6, 2015

Surrounded by a brutish father and brothers and aching for her dead mother, 14-year-old Joan Skraggs runs away from her family's Pennsylvania farm, makes her way to Baltimore, and is rescued from a park bench by a well-dressed young man. She presents herself as Janet Lovelace, age 18, and becomes "the hired girl," a servant to the Rosenbachs — a prosperous Jewish family who own a department store. It's 1911, the tail end of the Gilded Age, and world wars have yet to break out. Janet keeps a diary, and the reader quickly gleans that her notions of life come from three books: "Jane Eyre," "Dombey and Son" and "Ivanhoe." "I plan to go on as bravely as a heroine in a novel," she writes. "In my new life I'm not going to be vulgar. Even though I'm going to be a servant I'm going to cultivate my finer feelings. I will better myself and write with truth and refinement."

That diary is "The Hired Girl," a book that effortlessly transcends the conventions of the young adult genre. Organized around encounters with seven artworks, from Michelangelo's "The Erythraean Sibyl" to Winslow Homer's "Girl Reading on a Stone Porch," it is a portrait of the artist as a young maidservant — Janet, the book implies, may one day be an author. But first, she has to scrub floors, beat carpets, iron sheets and wash dishes while keeping kashrut. She's a tough and determined protagonist, but also impulsive, a bit of a meddler and an irrepressible romantic hungry for an education.

Laura Amy Schlitz won the Newbery Medal for her atmospheric evocation of the Middle Ages in "Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices From a Medieval Village," and she does have a gift for voices. Janet's voice — thoughtful, impetuous, alternately defiant and vulnerable — is full and throaty. "I read several of the Socratic dialogues and I liked them," Janet says, "but eventually I got tired of Socrates winning all the arguments." And while Schlitz's novel "Splendors and Glooms," a Gothic mystery about puppeteers, was told from multiple perspectives, "The Hired Girl" is all Janet. Fortunately, she's a charming companion.

The Rosenbachs are Janet's employers but also her mentors. Mr. Rosenbach converses with her about the origins of anti-Semitism and makes his library available to her. Twelve-year-old Mimi becomes Janet's friend and feeds her girlish impulses, showing her how to pin her hair, wear hats and buy petticoats. David Rosenbach, the wayward artist son, seductively paints Janet as Joan of Arc and takes her to see "La Traviata"; a kindly cad, he pulls her

from innocence with a forbidden kiss after which an emotional Janet, believing marriage will follow, writes breathlessly, “I wonder how married men go off to work every morning, when they could stay home and kiss their wives.”

Life with a Jewish family prompts Janet to explore her own childhood Catholicism by attending classes at a nearby church. She fluctuates in her understanding. Fearlessly she confronts a priest’s anti-Semitism, but she mistakenly thinks she can make a convert of the Rosenbachs’ young grandson and nearly loses her job. She questions the existence of God, then in an epiphany writes, “The closest thing I can say is that the absence of God, at that moment, was the presence of God.”

In many ways, “The Hired Girl” is a classic bildungsroman that dances heavily in the sunshine of Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre,” about another young girl who seeks to escape a difficult life and better herself, and unwittingly falls in love with her mentor. But Janet also shares kinship with other literary heroines — strong, boyish Jo March, who loves literature; courageous Joan of Arc, the 15th-century French saint Janet poses as for David. “The Hired Girl” is a homage to classics that could have been young adult novels before the category existed. Refreshingly, it assumes the reader, whatever her age, can handle complex relationships and inner turmoil. The beauty of this novel is that it dares to go beyond the school-is-cruel and paranormal-dystopian-romance conventions and lets its adolescent heroine think on the page about what makes a human being whole: art, love, faith, education, family, friendship. “My books promised me that life wasn’t just made up of workaday tasks and prosaic things,” Janet says. So does this one.