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from Kristin Bartus *Pacific Sun* -- a review of *The Vanishing Moon*

Family snapshots—A poignant portrait of each succeeding decade

"Most things that die wither away or we put them underground, but trees stay standing, rows of barren trunks that creak and moan until the onslaught of rain and snow finally brings them down. Trees return slowly to the earth, and so the stubborn shadows of their dissolution darkened our childhood games."

The many resplendent, impactful passages in Joseph Coulson's novel, *The Vanishing Moon*, make it easy to believe that he is a seasoned poet. Coulson does in fact have three books of poetry under his belt. The power of the book's engaging epic story would also suggest that Coulson is a veteran novelist, but that is not the case. This is the East Bay writer's first novel.

Born in 1957 in Detroit, Coulson earned a Ph.D. in American literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo. In the early to mid-'90s, he taught at Marin Academy and served as chair of the English department. He founded Marin Academy's Literary Festival in 1992. Although Coulson may not seem as fascinating as today's hip, young writing phenoms who appear out of nowhere and who we in the media love to make our darlings, he possesses something uniquely exhilarating for a newbie novelist: substantial life and literary experience. His affecting novel has already been honored by the Barnes and Noble's Discover Great New Writers Program.

The Vanishing Moon follows the lives of the Tollmans, a working-class family from the Midwest, through three generations. It starts at the beginning of the Great Depression and ends during the Vietnam War era. The Tollman family saga is told primarily from the perspective of three narrators and occurs during four distinct periods in the 20th century. Theirs is a dramatic, tragedy-filled tale, and one that thoughtfully

explores concepts of family, history and memory. The plot is wrenching enough to be a page-turner, yet genuine enough to make a profound impression without being overly moralistic.

Playing the most significant roles in the novel are brothers Stephen and Phil Tollman. Only 18 months apart in age, they share many adventures and much suffering while growing up in the Cleveland area. Together they climb trees, take care of their siblings, watch their mother go blind, lose their tormented father and fall in love with the same woman. Their experiences and paths are at once similar and divergent. As they age, they find it difficult to break free from the tragic moments of their past. In spite of his intentions, Stephen stagnates. An emotionally lost Phil simply unravels. Through the course of the novel, we experience the world of their loved ones as well, which sheds further light on the lives of the brothers.

There is a great deal of sadness in Coulson's work and the conclusion isn't exactly uplifting. Still, it's more gratifying than depressing. He does a wonderful job of putting the Tollmans' lives in historical and political context. Jumping between a variety of characters, Coulson essentially fills the book with a series of striking snapshots. He poignantly captures the mood of the different time periods the family lives through.

Coming from Detroit myself, I was especially impressed and touched by Coulson's portraits of the city circa 1968 a time when the place still had life left in it. From factory-town lifestyles and views on Catholicism to the excitement over boats and Tigers baseball, he gets Detroit's personality just right.

Coulson loses a bit of steam and lyrical zip as he winds the story down. The conclusion is a tad rushed, not as fully fleshed out as I hoped it would be. I wish we had gotten a chance to know Stephen even better. In spite of these points, overall Coulson has created a successful and meaningful first novel one of the best first novels I've read. It is gripping and it is moving. I found myself continuing to mourn the Tollman family's losses and wishing they could have moved beyond their pain.

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