THE GIVEN WORLD
by Marian Palaia

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One woman’s war.

Riley is a child when her brother leaves Montana for Vietnam. She’s still a child when her parents receive a letter explaining that Mick is missing and presumed dead. That Riley never recovers from this loss goes without saying, but her grief becomes a kind of loss of self. This is ironic in that Riley is a powerful narrator—funny, self-deprecating, fully aware of the feelings she refuses to be aware of. Her story is often heartbreaking, but she never asks for pity, and she most certainly never pities herself. Palaia covers a 25-year period spanning the 1970s, ’80s, and early ’90s, following Riley from the farm to San Francisco to Saigon and back home again. Alternating chapters present the viewpoints of other characters—Riley’s mother, her lover, strangers who help and befriend her—each of whom gives readers a fuller perspective on the protagonist while also being engaging in his or her own right. All of these disparate voices come together beautifully, as does the narrative as a whole. Palaia demonstrates a magnificent command of craft for a first-time novelist, but it’s her emotional honesty that makes this story so rich and affecting. The novel ends on a more hopeful note than the reader might expect, but it rings true nevertheless—largely because Riley doesn’t expect it, either. She knows that the chance she’s given is a gift. Like grace, it can’t be earned, only accepted with gratitude and awe.

An immensely rewarding read and a remarkable debut.