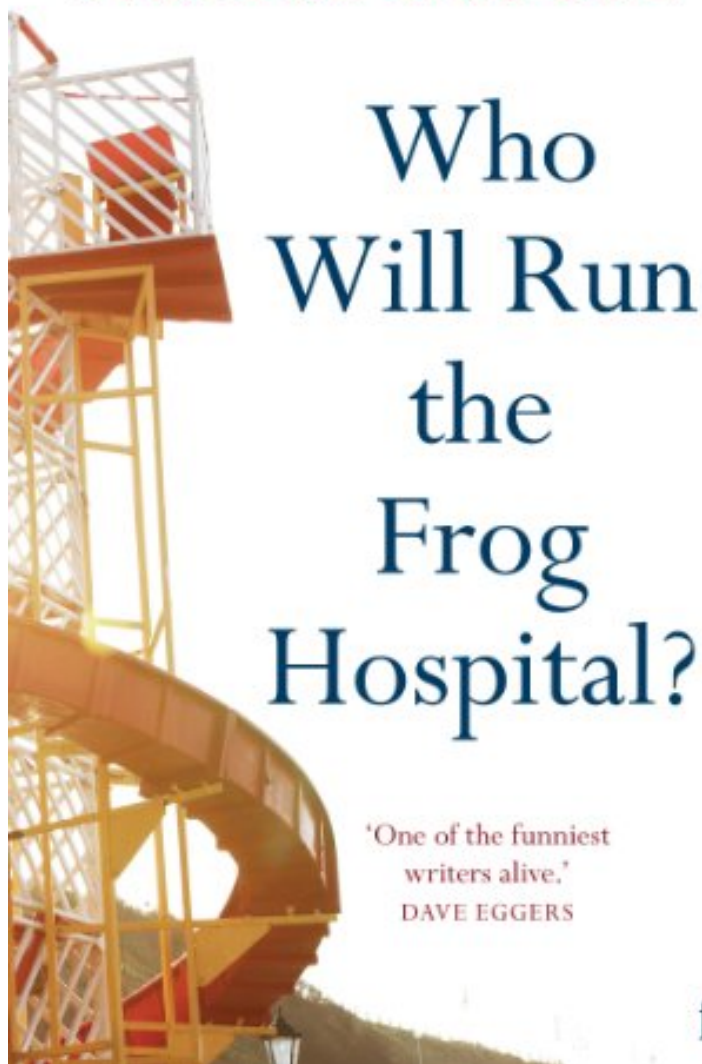


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# Who Will Run the Frog Hospital? (English Edition)

Lorrie Moore



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThis novel follows the lives of two 11-year-olds intent on escaping childhood. As the strength of their friendship is tested repeatedly, they begin to take their first, exhilarating steps towards adulthood.ExtraitIN PARIS we eat brains every night. My husband likes the vaporous, fishy mousse of them. They are a kind of seafood, he thinks, locked tightly in the skull, like shelled creatures in the dark caves of the ocean, sprung suddenly free and killed by light; they've grown clammy with shelter, fortified

vulnerability, dreamy nights. Me, I'm eating for a flashback. "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," says Daniel, my husband, finger raised, as if the thought has just come to him via the cervelles.

"Remember the beast you eat. And it will remember you." I'm hoping for something Proustian, all that forgotten childhood. I mash them against the roof of my mouth, melt them, waiting for something to be triggered in my head, in empathy or chemistry or some other rush of protein. The tempest in the teacup, the typhoon in the trout; there is wine, and we drink lots of it. We sit beside people who show us wallet pictures of their children. "Sont-ils si mignons!" I say. My husband constructs remarks in his own patois. We, us, have no little ones. He doesn't know French. But he studied Spanish once, and now, with a sad robustness, speaks of our childlessness to the couple next to us. "But," he adds, thinking fondly of our cat, "we do have a large gato at home." "Gteau means 'cake,'" I whisper. "You've just told them we have a large cake at home." I don't know why he always strikes up conversations with the people next to us. But he strikes them up, thinking it friendly and polite rather than oafish and irritating, which is what I think. Afterward we always go to the same chocolatier for whiskey truffles. One feels the captured storm in these, a warm storm under the tongue. "What aggrandizement are we in again?" my husband asks. "What 'aggrandizement'?" I say. "I don't know, but I think we're in one of the biggies." My husband pronounces *tirez* as if it were Spanish, *pre* as if it were *pier*. The affectionate farce I make of him ignores the ways I feel his lack of love for me. But we are managing. We touch each other's sleeves. We say, "Look at that!," wanting our eyes to merge, our minds to be one. We are in Paris, with its impeccable marzipan and light, its whiffs of sewage and police state. With my sore hip and his fallen arches ("fallen archness," Daniel calls it), we walk the quais, stand on all the bridges in the misty rain, and look out on this pretty place, secretly imagining being married to other people--right here in River City!--and sometimes not, sometimes simply wondering, silently or aloud, what will become of the world. WHEN I WAS a child, I tried hard for a time to split my voice. I wanted to make chords, to splinter my throat into harmonies--floreteed as a field, which is how I saw it. It seemed like something one should be able to do. With concentration and a muscular push of air, I felt, I might be able to people myself, unleash the crowd in my voice box, give birth, set free all the moods and nuances, all the lovely and mystical inhabitants of my mind's speech. Afternoons, by myself, I would go beyond the garden and the currant bushes, past the lavender-crowned chives and slender asparagus, past the sunflowers knocked bent by deer or an unseasonal frost, past the gully grass to the meadow far behind our house. Or I'd go down the road to the empty lot near the Naval Reserve where in winter the village plow and dump truck unloaded snow and where in summer sometimes the boys played ball. I would look out upon the wildflowers, the mulch of swamp and leaves, the spring moss greening on the rocks, or the boulderous mountains of street-black snow, whatever season it happened to be--my mittens clotted with ice, or my hands grimy with marsh mud--and from the back of my larynx I'd send part of my voice out toward the horizon and part of it straight up toward the sky. There must have been pain in me. I wanted to howl and fly and break apart. The result was much coughing, wheezing, and a hoarseness troubling, I was told by Mrs. LeBlanc, our cleaning woman, to hear in a child. "You getting a cold, Miss Berie Carr?" she might ask when I came in too soon for dinner. She would say my name like that, making it sound Irish, though it wasn't. "Nope," I'd say brusquely. She was jolly, but also bearish and oniony; I didn't like her breathing close; I didn't want her inspecting me like a nurse. We could scarcely afford a cleaning woman, but my mother was often lonely for talk, even in our crowded house, and she liked to sit with Mrs. LeBlanc in the kitchen, over cigarettes and tea. Even when I didn't see Mrs. LeBlanc, even when I'd successfully avoided her, I knew when she'd been there: the house would be full of smoke and still messy except for the magazines in neat stacks; my mother would be humming; the check on the counter would be gone. After a year, when the chords I wanted consistently failed to appear, and all I could make was a low droning rasp to accompany my main note (where was the choir of angels, the jazzy jazz?), I finally stopped. I began instead to wish on spiderwebs or five-sided stones. I wished for eternal and intriguing muteness. I would be the Mysterious Dumb Girl, the Enigmatic Elf. The human voice no longer interested me. The human voice was too plain. It was important, I felt, to do something fancy. I just didn't know what. Although no voice was ever plain in our house--not really. Even if it took practically my whole life, until the summer I was fifteen, for me to see that. There were fancinesses: Years of my mother's Canadian French slipping out only in the direst of lullabies. Or the faux-patrician lilt her voice fell into when she wanted to seem smart for her redoubtable in-laws--her voice became a trained one, trying to relocate itself socially and geographically. Or years of my father's college German fired across the dinner table, as my mother would try apprehensively to learn it this way, in order to talk with him at supper about private matters--without the children catching on. "Was ist los,

schtzchen?" "Ich weiss nicht." We would sometimes have students from other countries living with us for a few weeks, sleeping on one of the Hide-A-Beds--in the living room, cellar, or den. Sometimes there were teachers--from Tunisia, Argentina, or Tanzania, countries with names that sounded like the names of beautiful little girls. There were South American city planners, African refugees. "My parents were trying to shock the neighborhood," I would say years later, at social occasions when one was supposed to be able to speak of one's upbringing and be amusing at the same time. Everything in our house when I was young felt cloaked with foreignness, code, mood. People would come and stay, then go. One of the many results of this for me was a tin ear for languages. My brain worked stiffly, regrouped and improvised sounds. For a while I believed Sandra Dee was not only an actress but one of the French days of the week. I sang "Frre Jacques" with the bewildering line, "Sonny, lay my Tina." Knowing that a foreign tongue was often tense marital code, off-limits to the kinder, all forbidden chirp and wind, belonging to the guests, I grew sullen, and vaguely deaf, resentful in a way that was at the time inexplicable to myself; I tuned out. I played with my food--the heavily cerealed meat loaf, the Habitant soup and blood pudding, the peeling fish sticks--or else I ate too much of it. I stuffed my mouth and clutched my stomach, chewing. From early on and for a long time thereafter when I heard something not English--Mr. Gambari's Ibu, Mrs. Carmen-Perez singing a Spanish song--as a form of politeness my brain shut down. My teachers in school--French, German, Latin--would call on me, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I never knew what it was--their mouths just moving and the sounds reaching me, jumbled and scary. Later, when I was an adult, someone at a dinner party played me a recording of Asian monks who could indeed split their voices, create a shattered, choral sound that was like being oneself but also so many others. It was a choir of brokenness, lamentations. It wasn't pretty, but it reminded me again, right there at that dreary meal--everyone pronouncing on Marx, Freud, hockey, Hockney, mugged liberals, radicals with phlebitis, would Gorbachev soon have his own Hollywood Square?--it reminded me of the sound I might have managed if my efforts had succeeded. It reminded me of how children always thought too big; how the world tackled and chiseled them to keep them safe. Certainly "safe" is what I am now--or am supposed to be. Safety is in me, holds me straight, like a spine. My blood travels no new routes, simply knows its way, lingers, grows drowsy and fond. Though there are times, even recently, in the small city where we live, when I've left my husband for a late walk, the moon out hanging upside down like some garish, show-offy bird, like some fantastical mistake--what life of offices and dull tasks could have a moon in it flooding the sky and streets, without its seeming preposterous--and in my walks, toward the silent corners, the cold mulchy smells, the treetops suddenly waving in a wind, I've felt an old wildness again. Revenant and drunken. It isn't sexual, not really. It has more to do with adventure and escape, like a boy's desire to run away, revving thwartedly like a wish, twisting in me like a bolt, some shadow fastened at the feet and gunning for the rest, though, finally, it has always stayed to one side, as if it were some other impossible life and knew it, like a good dog, good dog, good dog. It has always stayed. The summer I was fifteen I worked at a place called Storyland with my friend Silsby Chaussee, who all this is really about. Storyland was an amusement park ten miles outside our little village of Horsehearts, a quarter mile from the lake. Its theme was storybook characters, and there were installations and little enactments depicting nursery rhymes--Hickory Dickory Dock or Little Miss Muffet--as well as fairy tales. Snow White. Hansel and Gretel. There were rides and slides. There was the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, which was a large purple boot you could climb to the top of, then coast down its aluminum tongue into a box of sand. There were the Three Billy Goats Gruff--an arced redwood bridge, a large plaster troll, and three live goats, who could be fed rye crisps purchased from a dispenser. There was the Jungle Safari section, with its floating rope bridges and submerged, fake crocodiles. There was Frontier Village, with its fake ghost town and the local high school boys dressed up as cowboys. Finally, there was Memory Lane, a covered promenade between the exit and the gift shop, lined with gaslit street lamps, and mannequins dressed in finery-- moth-eaten bustles and top hats--then propped precariously against antique carriages. Sometimes on rainy days Sils and I would eat our lunch in Memory Lane, on one of the park benches placed along the walk. We were conspicuous and out of place--half mimes, half vandals. But most of the tourists smiled and ignored us. We sang along with the tinny, piped-in music, whatever it was--usually "After the Ball" or "Beautiful Dreamer"--but sometimes it was just the Storyland theme song: Storyland, Storyland- not a sad and gory land. But a place where a lot of your dreams come true. Books come to life and nursery rhymes do, too. Storyland, Storyland: Bring the whole famil-lee! (And Grandma-ma!) The coda about Grandmama, hovering there in some kind of diminished seventh chord, like the comic soundtrack to a cartoon--waa-waa-waa--always made us grimace. We would sing along, our mouths full of sandwich, then open wide to

showcase our chewed-up food and our horror at the thought of our grandmothers there, in the park, somehow standing in line at one of the rides. And Grandmama!Eeek!Sils was beautiful--her eyes a deep, black-flecked aquamarine, her skin smooth as soap, her hair long and silt-colored but with an oriole yellow streak here and there catching the sun the way a river does. She was hired by the Creative Director to be Cinderella. She had to wear a strapless sateen evening gown and ride around in a big papier-mache pumpkin coach. Little girls would stand in line to clamber in and tour around the park with her--it was one of the rides-- then be dropped back off next to a big polka-dot mushroom. In between, Sils would come fetch me for a cigarette break.I was an entrance cashier. Six thousand dollars came through a single register every day. Customers complained about the prices, lied about their children's ages, counted out the change to double-check. "Gardez les billets pour les maneges, s'il vous plat," I would say to the Canadians. The uniform I wore was a straw hat, a red-and-white striped dress with a flouncy red pinafore over it, and a name tag on the bodice:Hello My Name Is Benote-Marie. I'd sewn nickels into the hem of the pinafore to keep it from flying up in breezes, but besides that there was nothing much you could do to make the dress look normal. Once I saw a girl who'd been fired the year before driving around town still wearing that pinafore and dress. She was crazy, people said. But they didn't have to say.In summer the whole county was full of Canadian tourists from over the border in Quebec. Sils loved to tell stories of them from her old waitress job at HoJo's: "I would like zome eggs," a man said once, slowly looking up words in a little pocket dictionary."How would you like them?" she'd asked.The man consulted his dictionary, finding each word. "I would like zem . . . ehm . . . on zee plate."From Publishers WeeklyA disillusioned, middle-aged woman's remembrance of an ephemeral teenage friendship is triggered by eating cervelles in a Parisian restaurant in Moore's acerbic, witty and affecting third novel (after *Like Life*). While vacationing in Paris, narrator Berie Carr, whose marriage is stuck in a bleakly funny state of suspended collapse, looks back to her girlhood in Horsehearts, an Adirondack tourist town near the Canadian border. There in the summer of 1972, she was a skinny, 15-year-old misfit who rejected her parents and idolized her sassy, sexually precocious friend Sils, who played Cinderella at a theme park called Storyland where Berie was a cashier. In a series of flashbacks, Berie recounts stealing into bars with Sils; sneaking cigarettes in the shadows of Storyland rides named Memory Lane and The Lost Mine; and how, midway through the summer, she was shipped off to Baptist camp after filching hundreds of dollars from her register to pay for an abortion for Sils. Moore's bitterly funny hymn to vanished adolescence is suffused with droll wordplay, allegorical images of lost innocence and fairy-tale witchery and a poignant awareness of how life's significant events often prove dismally anticlimactic. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.