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General

A Spell on the Water
Marjorie Kowalski Cole
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A young family ripped apart by one parent's early death is hardly new territory in fiction, and neither is the terrain of a strong widow holding together her family, forging a newly independent life, and succeeding against odds. Yet, owing to her clear prose and strong storyline, Marjorie Kowalski Cole brings a refreshing slant to this novel.

Much like the beloved northern Michigan lake where her characters choose to live, Cole's matriarch, Mary Leader, is possessed of a will that's both brilliantly clear and opaquely complicated. Mary moves her clan to the tiny summer lakeside resort they've tended since before her husband's death, but not always for the typically valiant reasons one fathoms. Widowed in the late 1950s, it would have been far easier to acquiesce to convention and sell; but she takes a stand, not so much for women's rights as for one woman's chance to escape what's expected. Similarly, her small stake in civil rights and her determined fostering of independence in all her children, regardless of gender, are rooted in her own fierce need to break a chain.

As each child comes of age, Mary makes sacrifices that help them while hindering her own growth; she's a compassionate, dedicated nurse who's also a flawed, overburdened being. Her irresponsible lapses occasionally cross tolerable lines, harming them all in subtle ways. Mary's five children each come of age in often predictable ways, as she moves back and forth between knowing herself as well as she knows the lake's shape, and being utterly confounded by what she sometimes says and does in response to motherhood and widowhood.

The author, who died before the book was published, bequeathed her readers a manuscript written with a full heart and disciplined hand. An accomplished poet with two books to her credit, as well as an award-winning first novel (*Correcting the Landscapes* received the 2004 Bellwether Prize), the author's confident craft means readers can sink deep into the rich story, companions along the way instead of observers at a distance. Problems are resolved in

unforeseen ways, characters change, depart, and die, as people do in life, and the family endures. Mary endures; battered but not bitter, tired yet newly energized by story's end, a reminder that the ideas of reinvention and second (and even third) careers are not unique to our time.

Lisa Romeo