



All That We Carried

Erin Bartels

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In Erin Bartels's novel *All That We Carried*, two sisters undertake a hiking trip that's fraught with perils.

The Greene sisters have been estranged for a decade, ever since their parents were killed in an automobile accident and Melanie chose to forgive the person responsible for the deaths. When Melanie convinces Olivia to join her on a trip to the Porcupine Mountains, the women carry more than just their backpacks into Michigan's wilderness.

The tension between Melanie and Olivia combines with the tension of them dealing with the challenges of the wild. The novel is taut and engaging as the sisters meet disasters, one after the other. Their accidents cause additional friction, although they help one another through each ordeal. A fisherman, Josh, shows up when he's most needed, assisting the sisters as they navigate the remainder of their trip.

As the sisters are tested physically, they also debate God's existence, with Josh contributing to these religious exchanges. After their parents' deaths, Olivia no longer believes in a benevolent God, while Melanie's beliefs are a smorgasbord, with Christian elements included. Their mutual assessment of their differing religious stances helps to bring them closer to understanding one another and themselves.

Bartels's descriptions of the Upper Peninsula's natural wonders and beauty are vibrant, encompassing trails, rivers, lakes, and waterfalls with in-the-moment details. Lake Superior is depicted as powerful, while the image of a divided waterfall becomes a metaphor for the issues that the sisters face. While not all of their problems are resolved by the end of their trip, they attain spiritual growth and needed maturation because of their grueling experiences.

In the novel *All That We Carried*, troubled sisters take a challenging trip into the wilderness.

JILL BEAUCHAMP (January / February 2021)

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