



Angle of Declination

Doug Mayfield

Sally Mayfield

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Values, ethics, forgiveness, and the fragile thread that entwines them create both the human foundation and the ultimate conflict at the core of Doug and Sally Mayfield's beautifully written novel, *Angle of Declination*.

Allie, the story's narrator, was raised by a widowed mother who "reduced life to its simplest terms" and possessed "an overheated sense of right and wrong and saw—or tried to see—everything in terms of moral implications and cause-and-effect relationships." Allie brings the strict moral code of her upbringing to her marriage to Mike, a Vietnam vet who has seen and done things that his new wife undoubtedly could never imagine, let alone accept. Mike's approach to conflict is to put it in the past: "I've got ghosts like everybody else, but I do what I have to do, then I move on. I don't wallow in it." When the couple's disparate backgrounds and approaches are tested by a serious moral dilemma, their marriage begins to unravel.

Set in the early 1970s, the tale unfolds in the wilderness of Canada and along the St. Lawrence River of upstate New York—places the Mayfields describe so exquisitely that the dramatic locales become characters in and of themselves. Hunting and fishing camps for the wealthy, First Nation reservations occupied by the poorest of the forgotten, and even the little-known cross-the-border smuggling culture of the era—when Vietnam War draftees and others were seeking refuge in Canada—figure prominently in the story.

As the story progresses, seemingly tangential events like the Watergate scandal and the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee echo and foreshadow Allie and Mike's own struggles. (Abbie Hoffman himself even appears sporadically, both as an archetype and as an actual character.) The intrusion of these "real world" events is skillfully handled, often introduced via details read in newspapers, days after the actual occurrence.

The book's title, *Angle of Declination*, aptly describes the conflicts in the lives of Allie and Mike, as well as their personal histories and perspectives. For Allie, who symbolically carries her grandfather's compass with her throughout her travels, "true north" has always been the magnetic "N" to which her compass points. For Mike, it is the angle of declination—the space *between* magnetic north and true north—that guides his own moral compass. To ignore that angle is hazardous in navigation at sea, and, as Allie eventually comes to realize, perilous in life itself. As the Mayfields so fittingly illustrate, nothing is ever as precise as the needle of the compass might suggest.

CHERYL M. HIBBARD (April 6, 2012)

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