

★ **Beneficence**

Meredith Hall

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When love is great, its loss can consume you; so a family learns in Meredith Hall's delicate, poignant novel, *Beneficence*.

Doris became a Senter the day her husband, Tup, brought her to his family farm. She was happy to settle into the rhythms of farm life. She taught her three children to regard the land's bounty as a beneficence. If anything was a stain on this bucolic existence, it was Doris's lingering fear that the family's peace might be disrupted. A winter morning and an accident with an old family gun brought everything she'd feared.

Three Senters convince themselves that they were responsible: Doris, Tup, and their daughter, Dodie. They narrate; Dodie's elder and younger brothers are quiet but abiding presences in the family's tale of deep love and unbound grief. Dodie assumes her stultified mother's daily chores, trying to hold the drifting pieces of her fractured family together; perfect memories and unanswerable regrets rise up. Doris cannot make herself reach out to her family, and laments what she did not know before: that happiness is a universe that you can visit, not inhabit. Tup, desperate for the love that his family once embodied, begins an affair, coming to live two separate lives.

Spare but decked with moments of crystalline beauty, the book's descriptions of farming the Maine countryside are authentic and enchanting. There are no ostentatious displays, and so the novel's magnificence sneaks up in the same unassuming way that autumn sunlight spills across harvested fields, that sound breaks the silence of a heavy snow, and that the hidden barbs of loss present themselves across the years.

A family flounders in grief, but finds their way home through forgiveness and acceptance, in *Beneficence*, Meredith Hall's gorgeous and moving new novel.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2020)

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