



Best Bet

Laura Pedersen

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Home may be where the heart is, but sometimes it takes a trip around the world to figure out exactly where your heart belongs.

Hallie Palmer believes she is just one more step away from full-time happiness: she's about to graduate college, move in with her longtime boyfriend, and start a new job. But her plans are put asunder by a delusional adviser who neglected to inform her of the proper number of credits needed to graduate; suddenly she faces another semester of school. Luck may still be on her side, though; an old friend offers her a trip around the world as part of a sociology experiment in lieu of a boring classroom. Despite her boyfriend's lack of enthusiasm and subsequent ultimatum, off she flies.

Traveling doesn't bring quite the excitement she thought it would. Sure, she and the rest of the team party on a beach in Hawaii, see the Taj Mahal at sunrise, win big at a Malaysian casino, and visit an alternative lifestyle pub in Donegal, but still, Hallie feels like something is missing. Finally, in the midst of a less-than-passionate embrace with her friend Josh, she realizes what that something is. Luckily it's the end of the trip, and she flies home to find it. But regaining the love and trust of the people she left behind proves to be as challenging as navigating the chaotic streets of New Delhi.

Reading *Best Bet* is like being at a party with some very funny people; Laura Pedersen, who has won prizes for her fiction and whose second novel was selected for the Barnes & Noble "Discover Great New Writers" program, has a distinct knack for creating spirited characters. Hallie, her saintly mother, her nine brothers and sisters, her friends Bernard, Olivia, Mandy, and Banjo, and even the giggling gaggle of girl scouts all leap fully formed from the binding, ready to make us laugh. One-liners pepper each page with savvy wit and nearly every conversation is a friendly test in movie trivia, pop music history, or Shakespeare.

Pedersen occasionally allows convenience to rule her plot rather than let the story develop organically, like when Uncle Lenny returns from being lost at sea just moments after three couples have finished their wedding vows and the party is in full swing. But these momentary lapses in credibility are easily forgiven; this novel is meant to make readers laugh, and at that it heartily succeeds.

Snuggled among bouts of laughter, moments of emotional clarity lie in wait for sentimental readers. While Hallie's life is an enviable series of funny skits, she's also searching for a sense of grace. "Every day is a bounty and your best bet is to make it count," Pederson writes, "just like the flowers come up after the darkness and the rain, not in spite of it, but because of it."

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