



## Bitter Lake

**Marika Deliyannides**

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*Bitter Lake is an accomplished work on silence: what happens when families ignore a tragic moment.*

A melancholic debut by Marika Deliyannides, *Bitter Lake* explores one woman's "aching disquietude" and the latent complications of homecoming.

As Zoe Lemonopolous returns to her childhood home to help her parents move to a retirement villa, she confronts the fallout of a teenage incident that led to estrangement from her younger sister, Dorothea, and to her own ambivalence toward impending motherhood. Subtle in its gradual revelations and unapologetic in its characters' avoidance of pain, this intelligent novel portrays the arrival of emotional maturity in Zoe's thirties.

Domestic scenes of Zoe's married life in Calgary and of her family's home in rural Concord alternate with flashbacks to the 1980s in a contemplative plot that depicts the humiliations of youth, widening rifts between lovers, and Zoe's abandonment of Dorothea, who comes to harm in her absence. Deliyannides, whose novel excerpt from *Bitter Lake* received The Calgary Foundation's Brenda Strathern Prize, offers a nuanced perspective on regret. Guilt and desire mix with fear and complacency. Zoe's tendency to "reframe" memories in ways that deflect blame—a frustrating habit—and to walk away from hard conversations quickly become an unbearable way to live. Careful scenes build toward a watershed that results in a fragile, tacit truce.

Scenes of Zoe packing her parents' belongings temper darker topics, such as rape and infidelity. They also serve as effortless transitions between memories. The objects themselves, from eye-shaped charms to a lava lamp, reveal Zoe's life as the daughter of a Greek father and Canadian mother. Zoe's work as a professional organizer also allows her to make astute observations, including "It seemed my entire adult life had been about keeping things tidy instead of resolved." The recurring theme of imposing order on the external world while experiencing inner discord serves as a particularly thoughtful backdrop as Zoe attempts to push away her own increasing self-doubt.

While much of the focus remains on Zoe's memories of being bullied, her tense relationship with her husband, and her failed attempt at reconnecting with a classmate from her past, it is her parents who emerge as imperfect, memorable forces. Their appearances, both in the present and past, and the physical reminders of their decades together create a colorful portrait of lives shaped by struggle. The book is less rewarding when focusing on detailing moments of pettiness between Zoe and Dorothea; while this captures the strains in their relationship, Dorothea is left seeming merely distanced.

*Bitter Lake* is an accomplished work on silence: what happens when families ignore a tragic moment, and what happens when individuals refuse to accept their own fortunate circumstances. It is an unsettling, worthy read.

KAREN RIGBY (December 2, 2014)

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