

Caroline

Adrian Spratt

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Caroline is a subtle and poignant novel in which an impressionable lawyer falls in love.

In Adrian Spratt's elegiac romance novel *Caroline*, a lawyer forms a relationship with an adrift woman and reckons with his disability.

Nick, a blind lawyer in his midtwenties living in Reagan-era Brooklyn Heights, is an introspective man. He's been disappointed by love and is now cautious about it. Nonetheless, he's intrigued when he meets Caroline in a creative writing course. He's working on a short story and novel excerpt—both projects about himself, veiled as fiction. Through it all, Nick ruminates on what it's like to navigate blindness in a presumptuous, sighted world.

Between fielding comments from other writers in his workshop, Nick reminisces loosely about his parents and his past; converses with colleagues; and appears in court. His story is rearward-gazing and marked by his own sense of ambiguity: in a post-college bachelorhood state, his options for his career, and for love, seem limitless, but he's daunted by the possibilities. Indeed, he's yet to define what he wants.

The languorous buildup around the couple's relationship mirrors their doubts: Caroline discloses few details about her living arrangements and plans, while Nick, who recognizes her instability, is reluctant to consider her as his girlfriend. Still, their passion for each other is evident, and their unspoken dependence on each other is movingly detailed.

Given to digressions, including excerpts from Nick's writing and the workshop, the story takes a roundabout approach to addressing its intriguing questions about blindness and what it's like to write from a perspective that depends on nonvisual strategies. But once the class—which is responsible for pulling Nick and Caroline together—is done, Nick's writing is forced into the novel's background.

Caroline's mental health decline becomes a point of focus in the book's later sections, in which Nick blames himself for their inability to advance their relationship. The results are haunting. But because Caroline's depression is understood only through Nick's nostalgic, pained memories, her own feelings are surmised rather than defined; she's more of a troubled, free-spirited archetype in the novel than a fleshed-out figure. Further, the novel's secondary characters, including Nick's assistants and Caroline's bar patrons, are limited by the circumstances of their connections to the couple. They express concerns about Nick and Caroline, but are an unsteady force; both Nick and Caroline are somewhat isolated regardless of their attentions.

Working toward a tragic conclusion, *Caroline* is a subtle and poignant novel in which an impressionable lawyer falls in love.

KAREN RIGBY (December 2, 2021)

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