



Dead Drunk

Jean Ayer

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Faithfully discreet servants, heiresses, and high-handed gentry may seem like the sole province of *Downton Abbey* and the like, but Jean Ayer exposes a new generation of scandal in the delightfully quirky *Dead Drunk*, set in the fictional seaside town of French Haven, Maine. Double gin martinis and dysfunction are served up in this breezy summer tale turned murder mystery. With honesty and insight, Ayer penetrates the glamorous facade of the wealthy “summer people” by revealing the tragic consequences of alcoholism over generations.

Richard has worked for George and Margaret Wollaston for more than a decade. He enjoys eccentric Aunt Beth’s inscrutable ramblings, quietly entertains romantic notions toward Angie, and admires Margaret’s classy demeanor. He is well known and well liked by the wealthy summer families: “Richard waits tables. He tends bar, he cooks, he’ll fix your flowers, he’ll go out in your garden and *pick* your flowers. He’ll feed your dog; he’ll climb a tree to get your cat down. Richard does everything.” This particular summer, Richard will also discover the lifeless body of a Wollaston family member and be thrust into a surprising investigation encompassing both the upper crust and lower dregs of French Haven society.

Dead Drunk begins with a heartfelt introduction that sets the scene, tone, and background for the story, and also sheds light on the inspiration behind it. It is worth noting that the premise originated in Ayer’s own experiences living with an alcoholic husband. The introduction is followed by a list of principal characters, reminiscent of the great American plays of the twentieth century. Chapter titles, including “George on the Porch,” “Richard Upstairs,” and “James and Angie” add to the overall stage effect and even pacing found throughout. Ayer infuses the Wollastons’ world with sights, sounds, tastes, and smells that virtually leap off the page.

Ayer handles serious topics such as alcoholism, verbal abuse, suicide, drug use, rebellion, and divorce with sensitivity and insight that add a level of believability to the characters. George’s relationship with his wife, Margaret, and their children, Angie and Tony, is vivid in its complete breakdown, and it is easy to see how a beloved husband and father can become an adversary through years of alcohol abuse: “Laughter was his weapon, laced with irony and ridicule. He used his weapons thoughtlessly and thoroughly, seemingly unaware that the kids were too young to understand or defend themselves.” Despite the gravity of emotions, Ayer keeps the tone light, allowing *Dead Drunk* to serve as both an enjoyable and a cautionary tale.

The novel is in turns sensitive and humorous, delving into the private lives and societal expectations surrounding the Wollaston clan. The town of French Haven is vividly drawn with sympathetic, evolving characters, yet the plot is filled with enough twists, turns, and sleuthing to satisfy those in search of a murder mystery. Consider filling the time between episodes of *Downton Abbey* with a copy of *Dead Drunk*.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (June 3, 2014)

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