

Divorce, Dog Style

Maria Flook

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At the center of Maria Flook's *Divorce, Dog Style* is a hapless, loyal, and beloved German shepherd named Butter, who has been diagnosed with cancer and will soon be put to sleep. Butter's impending demise brings together the various characters of this intriguing novel, who all arrive at Butter's owner Caroline's lovely New England farmhouse by the sea.

The novel encompasses a single day. With elements of a classic tragedy, melancholy tension builds along with the passing hours before Butter's euthanasia. Caroline prepares separate feasts for the dog and for her guests; blonde, full-figured, and confidently nurturing, she has a general earth-and-sea-goddess quality, attracting men and, unfortunately, her share of drama.

The story's narrator is Grafton, who has been a friend and occasional lover to Caroline since their college years at Boston University. He is intrigued by and even jealous of her other involvements, but is never focused enough to commit to a lasting relationship. Grafton's tone is witty, sharp, and occasionally poetic, with a shrewd awareness of his own flaws. Caroline knows Grafton well enough to keep a romantic distance, but their otherwise candid closeness is appealing and well developed.

Set between seasons and squalls, on the border of the land and the ocean, and in a place aptly called Middletown, the novel has a sense of impending transitions. Caroline and Grafton are approaching forty. Caroline is navigating a divorce, while Grafton prepares to start a new job. Caroline's stepson, whom she was quite close to, has recently died in an accident, leaving behind a haunting absence and more feelings of upheaval and loss.

Though the subject matter may seem weighty, Grafton's welcome perspective offers plenty of snide, sage, or soulful commentary during *Divorce, Dog Style*'s singularly stormy and emotionally intense dog day.

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