

Eden: A Novel

Jeanne McWilliams Blasberg

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Eden is an atmosphere-rich, thoroughly satisfying story of family connections.

Jeanne McWilliams Blasberg's *Eden* is an inviting and cozy family saga, the perfect book to settle in to.

Being a widow is tough enough, but even tougher when generations of accumulated wealth have been frittered away by the dearly departed husband. The cherry on top is that as a result, Eden, the family's to-die-for seaside compound in Rhode Island, must be sold to cover expenses.

Becca, the soon-to-be-homeless widow, summons everyone to a final Fourth of July holiday at the beloved cottage. She will break the news to the family while harboring hopes that her two brothers, who share a stake in Eden, will ride to its financial rescue.

Things get even stickier with the arrival of the first guest. Sarah, Becca's favorite granddaughter, is pregnant, unmarried, and without a plan. Other members of this large family have their own issues, including greed, envy, and some very long-standing resentments. It isn't long before these conflicts result in a fight for possession of Eden. Plots arise, alliances form, and secrets circle in the air like gulls. The profusion of family members can be a bit hard to keep straight at first, but a family tree at the front of the book is a handy reference.

The present-tense narration covers the weeks shortly before and after the holiday gathering. While this could make for a slow pace, it doesn't. The story moves smoothly back and forth to explore other pivotal times in the family's history, embracing a time frame that runs from 1915 to 2000. This keeps the pace—and the sense of discovery—moving.

While Becca is always the strong, uniting focal point, other chapters bring different family members to the fore, illuminating critical junctures of their lives. One of the pleasures of the book is that only the reader knows everything, while family members often keep things from each other.

With few exceptions, characters are well developed and believable, and their relationships shift and grow as the narrative unfolds. Becca initially despairs over her granddaughter Sarah's blithe approach to single motherhood, but ends up finding strength in her. And just as each member of the clan has a unique relationship with other members, so does each character have a distinct relationship—and a wealth of memories—with the property that's at stake.

The book makes great use of its coastal setting. It's easy to picture Eden, the kind of sprawling, shabby-chic mansion that's pinned to a million wish lists. The town that it borders is equally vivid, with elegantly restored buildings and the whiff of old money scenting its gardens and golf courses. The story deftly mines the town to show just how much money can be squandered in the race to keep up appearances.

At times, the text works too hard to establish its patrician feel. Becca's father, the founding patriarch, was nicknamed Bunny; other characters have names like Camilla and Alistair, and gardening is a favored pastime, lending an air that's more Balmoral than Newport. An engrossing story line and realistic central characters keep the book from

sailing over the edge.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (November 18, 2017)

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