

Heartache & Sin

Charles Soto

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Charles Soto's debut novel zeroes in on the controversial abortion argument. Set in North Dakota, *Heartache & Sin* has a little bit of everything; religion, sex, love, family, and loyalty are just some of the elements that make up the story's rich plot. The novel follows Steven as he watches his wife Karen fall headfirst into a charismatic and manipulative preacher's new congregation. Karen is diabetic, and her life is in danger when she discovers she is pregnant. Soon there is a fight between Steven and the preacher—not simply over which house should hold her Karen's spirituality, but whether or not she will keep the baby.

Crafting realistic dialogue is no easy task, especially when dealing with a healthy dose of dialect. Soto, however, is a master at recreating the region's accents. The clipped language of these characters speaks as much to their culture as it does to their education and personalities. The most unique pieces of this novel center on the interactions between the characters, where as much exists below the surface as above it. For example, the interactions between Steven and the preacher are incredibly layered: they dance around one another, concealing their dislike for one another. The finely crafted scenes between these two men create an excellent sense of suspense.

Though the husband is a complex and likable character, his wife is not as fully fleshed out. Karen's decision is a difficult one, and yet, she is often portrayed as ignorant and innocent. With so much of the plot riding on her decision and beliefs, this character should have grown more throughout the story. The preacher similarly is two-dimensional—his chief purpose is to play the villain of the story. The conflict at the heart of the novel would have been more realistic and complex if his character were more sympathetic.

Soto shapes a unique world, where people are still strongly linked to the land, their families, and loyalty. The preacher is not only a threat to Steven's marriage but to the culture and livelihood of this North Dakota community. With a plot twist around every corner, readers will open one door only to find another door. The conflicts at the heart of this novel are complex: there is no easy solution to this situation. Soto is not afraid to make difficult decisions with this plot, and this heightens the novel's suspense. The final scenes of the novel will keep readers on the edge of their seats, and the ending will leave them shell-shocked.

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