Clarion Review

General

How Did She Get There?
Ann Karen Dowd
White Ink Press
978-0-615-33530-8
Four Stars (out of Five)

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Caro Barrone is devastated when her best friend Marcie is killed. Caro's husband Zach has been dead for five years, and her daughter Abby lives in London. Caro and Marcie had planned to spend the summer in a rented beach house in the Hamptons, and despite Marcie's death, Caro decides to go ahead with this plan.

Caro is disconsolate and begins her vacation in brooding despair as she examines her relationships with the three most important people in her life, all of whom have left her through death or distance. As she comes to the realization that she always put poetry before people and that she has in fact never known real love for anyone, she meets thirteen-year-old Livia Valdez, a beautiful and lonely girl who wants to be a poet. Caro sees a great deal of herself in young Livia and she befriends the girl's aunt and uncle, Nina and Tommy, whom Livia is spending the summer with. When Caro accompanies Livia and her aunt to a tattoo parlor, she makes a shocking discovery that furthers her despair and sends her seeking an ideal love. She is particularly taken with the idea of love as presented in Plato's Symposium, which has nothing to do with sex but focuses instead on beauty. She sees in Livia an opportunity to experience true love, but as the summer progresses she comes to the horrifying realization that she cannot separate loving Livia from lusting after her.

Author Ann Karen Dowd is a gifted writer and the book is very readable. Readers will feel compassion for Livia, an immature and highly emotional preteen who feels abandoned by her mother and used by her aunt, but who adores Caro as a hero. That said, *How Did She Get There?* is a very uncomfortable story, and it is difficult to sympathize with Caro. When Marcie dies and Caro begins to contemplate the meaning of love, Dowd writes, "She had to admit she hadn't loved Zach to the depth she'd been avowing all those years. Selfish? Yes. She'd banked her love like gold bullion in a vault, doling it out only when she saw fit, for fear that

squandering her feelings would compromise her art." Caro does not even give her love freely to Abby; instead she depends on Zach to parent their child. She is unable to realize the mistakes she is making with her family until it is too late to correct them, and then she allows the realization to lead her down a path toward destruction.

Ultimately the book is about self awareness and the meaning of love. Readers of a philosophical nature will enjoy the opportunity for contemplation offered by the complex emotional journey that Caro takes. Readers should be prepared, however, for the discomfiture that Caro's thoughts and actions toward Livia will inspire.

Catherine Thureson