



How to Build a Boat

Elaine Feeney

Biblioasis (Nov 7, 2023)

Softcover \$17.95 (304pp)

978-1-77196-585-9

A motherless, neurodivergent boy bonds with his childless teacher in Elaine Feeney's novel *How to Build a Boat*.

Jamie's first day of secondary school was a complete catastrophe. But he also met Tess, an English teacher who treats him with kindness. Tess, like Jamie, never got to know her mother. Each feels lost in their own way.

Tess and Jamie spend the school term getting to know each other and themselves. They learn to find their own places in the world, away from the expectations of others. Along the way, Tess, who's struggling with infertility and a crumbling marriage, develops an attraction to the school's woodworking teacher, who helps Jamie with a boat-building project that may allow him to process his mother's death at last.

Scenes depicting Jamie's challenges are made all the more upsetting by the fact that he cannot understand the full danger of the bullying he faces or of the bigotry being planted in the students' minds by extremist staff members. His inborn rationality proves both a help and a hindrance, serving as a barrier to adults' bad intentions and to more flexible ways of viewing the world that could help him better deal with his overwhelming emotions. An eventful holiday break brings clarity to Tess—and trouble for everyone else.

Ending with a scene of quiet beauty, like the first beam of sunshine after a rainstorm, that cannot last forever but whose serenity is memorable and relieving, *How to Build a Boat* is a novel about the pressure that people face to mold to the expectations of others—and the relief of being able to shove that pressure aside.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2023)

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