

If or When I Call

Will Johnson

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Will Johnson's novel *If or When I Call* is a contemporary tale of addiction, love, and family, set in rural Missouri.

Parker and Melinda fall in love one Christmas; seven years later, their son, Ben, is born. After becoming a father, Parker starts to experience panic attacks and fits. He turns to alcohol to keep these terrifying episodes at bay, and he lives every moment on the edge of an undiagnosed disorder, via which he could lose himself and his family.

As Parker's relationship with his wife is threatened by his addiction, he watches their young love slowly die, until Melinda and he become "a couple of flatlining roommates." They eventually split up. Melinda's sister invites her and Ben into her home, silencing the talk of the town and offering them a safe place where they can find happiness again.

The novel alternates between its characters' points-of-view, following as their broken family learns how to live with loss and pain, and later undertakes a mad search for recovery and purpose. Its focus is on small, ordinary moments within their everyday lives. It jumps in and out of their pasts and present, giving each a distinct, clear voice. Ben's narration is particularly raw and touching; as a teenager, he learns to cope with his parents' failed marriage.

Johnson's prose is lyrical and evocative—not surprising, given his experience as a musician and songwriter. Beautiful, heartbreaking descriptions of otherwise mundane moments and memories make the novel even more engrossing.

If or When I Call is a tender novel about the brokenness of human nature, and about what it feels like to live with addiction and an undiagnosed illness.

ANNA MARIA COLIVICCHI (March / April 2021)

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