



I'll Always Be with You

Violetta Armour

iUniverse (Jun 24, 2015)

Softcover \$19.95 (340pp)

978-1-4917-6830-3

Armour presents a powerful look at how grief and hope play an important part in the healing process.

In *I'll Always Be with You*, Violetta Armour crafts a simple but engaging tale of life after loss. In the wake of a man's sudden death, his son, wife, mother, and old flame unite not only in grief, but in hope and pride at having had his influence in their lives. This emotionally charged story draws in multiple generations and touches on important social issues.

Stan is giving his son, Teddy, a driving lesson when a drunk driver crashes into them. Stan is killed instantly, leaving Teddy racked with grief and sorrow, but also a deep well of survivor's guilt. Hoping to alleviate some of the guilt, Teddy's mom pulls up stakes to take the family home. In this case, home is Stan's childhood home and the arms of his tenderhearted mother, Baba. There the family confronts Stan's past, his effect on those around him, his relationships in high school, and a glimmer of hope for a future without him.

The author presents a look at how grief and hope play an important part in the healing process. Through three main characters, the story rotates points of view to examine the loss of a loved one. It never devolves into pointless melancholy, but simmers like a pot of family recipe chicken soup, goes down wonderfully, and warms from within. The main character is decidedly Teddy. He has to cope with losing his father during an already hectic time, the teenage years. Coupled with the recent move, it seems like he may never pull himself out of the well of sorrow and guilt. Until, that is, he connects with his sweet and doting grandmother and discovers his father's legacy. A family book full of wisdom brought from Bulgaria and read by fathers to their sons provides a life boat. The author keeps Teddy grounded in realism and steers clear of the cliché reactions to loss, allowing for a heartfelt journey.

The story's plot is simply the family responding to their loss. However, the side story of Stan's high school relationship with the vivacious Rosetta is powerful. They fall in love at a time of great upheaval, the 1960s. Their interracial love unfortunately breaks in the face of hate and fear. Rosetta never truly recovers from that time, despite marrying and having a family. After hearing of Stan's death, she begins to bond with Stan's newly relocated family. Rosetta's attempts to learn more about Stan while not intruding on their loss adds a layer of emotion to an already powerful story. Teddy's journey, Rosetta's yearning, and Stan's past weave deftly in a way that keeps the story from drowning in sorrow.

I'll Always Be with You is simply written, but that's perfect for this story. While it could benefit from some polishing, the prose is swift and sweeps along, keeping attention on what is truly important. Following these characters as they cope, discover truths, and embrace a new future feels like a warm embrace. These characters realistically find solace in loved ones, family traditions, and beloved food dishes. While the topic is inherently sad, the author shows that life goes on and the bad times shape the future in a heartwarming tale full of love, life, and laughter.

JOHN M. MURRAY (August 20, 2015)

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