

Last Bets

Mary Carroll Moore

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A vacation friendship transforms two women's lives in the dynamic novel Last Bets.

In Mary Carroll Moore's novel *Last Bets*, art and catastrophe provide a joint purpose for a woman and a teenager escaping their troubles on a Caribbean island.

Elly flies from DC to Bonaire to finish a commissioned portrait and receive her final payment. The alternative is to return the client's deposit, which she's already spent. She expects that Trevor, her client, will host her at his gated oceanview home. Instead, the new owner directs her to the Flamingo Resort: Trevor now lives at its dive shop, having lost his home because of gambling.

At the resort, Elly meets Steve and Rosie, an Australian father-daughter duo on the island for a monthlong backgammon tournament. Steve is a high-stakes player on a winning streak. If they win enough money, they'll be free of Rosie's grandmother's edicts and interference. Rosie (a teenager, but already an experienced diver) helps, both by finding out how much other players have to lose and by proving herself by working for Trevor for free.

Pivotal to the book's progression are the parallels between Elly's and Rosie's lives. Both are artists, both feel betrayed by women close to them (Elly lost her husband to a friend; Rosie's boyfriend began dating her sister and slept with her best friend), and both of their fathers gambled to the detriment of their marriages. The narrative trades between their points of view from chapter to chapter, helping them to tell their stories. In one chapter, Elly is reminded of her younger sister Lily, who died years ago, when she looks at Rosie. In another, Rosie searches a room, picks up a wig, and thinks of her mother, who died of cancer. Though the jumps between the heroines are jarring at first, this shifting focus fleshes out their internal lives at a steady rate. However, the book's other characters are less developed, including quite influential ones who appear only in the women's memories (Elly's husband, Matt; Elly's sister; and Rosie's mother).

Dynamic plot shifts and surprises result from the three activities that drive the characters' decisions—tournament backgammon, art, and scuba diving. Watching Steve win at the backgammon table, Elly remembers she often tapped into her "visions" to help her father win. Rosie breaks into Elly's cabin and uses her pastels to change the portrait of Trevor. And resort guests go on suspenseful dives in choppy water. Meanwhile, illuminating details (including Australian slang and language specific to diving, art, and backgammon) further flesh out the setting and the women's situations.

In the warm novel *Last Bets*, two women flee from bad choices and find redemption in their developing friendship.

LYNNE JENSEN LAMPE (January 11, 2024)

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