

On the Waterfront

Mike McCoy

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On the Waterfront is an earthy novel in which a boy's life is changed by a swimming-centered relationship.

In Mike McCoy's coming-of-age novel *On the Waterfront*, the youngest staff member at a Boy Scout camp matures through hard work, tragedy, and an unlikely friendship.

In the late 1970s, thirteen-year-old Danny can't wait to get away from home and earn his own money. Since his father left, he lives with his mom in a rundown rented house that he maintains while she's off on dates. He fights with his younger brother. But Danny's age stymies his plans to remake himself at Camp Baker, where he doesn't fit in. Still, he works as part of the kitchen staff and hopes to join the elite waterfront team.

Mark, an older staffer whose stint in juvenile detention earned him a bad reputation, is assigned to teach Danny to swim as punishment for a crime that he may not have committed. Mark gives Danny unmerciful workouts. Over the course of water emergencies, accusations against Mark, and treks through the woods, though, the two overcome their differences and forge a lasting bond.

The cast is developed best via conversations and in terms of how people's personalities play off of one another. For example, Mark and Danny are foils for each other: Danny's sensitivity hides his strengths, while Mark's bravado covers up his vulnerabilities. In the water, they find comfortable neutrality. The two show their best and worst qualities to each other, bringing together happy and sad moments in a bittersweet way.

When the novel starts, Danny's ordinary issues are exacerbated by his family traumas. The banter, teasing, and antics of the first part of the book show that other boys face similar challenges. They play war against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, and the music, slang, and clothing of the era wind in to the story. Danny's particular qualities as a worker differentiate him better in the novel's middle, where he finds ways to work faster, not harder, in the camp kitchen, so that he has more free time and time to train in the water. And the book's spacious descriptions of the landscape complement Danny's work to realize his dreams.

The novel handles tough themes like sexuality with tender solemnity. However, its final chapters include another marked tonal shift: there are declarations about feelings to reflect Danny's sweeping personal changes. A Boy Scout ritual that's fashioned after Native American ceremonies is a solemn and public display of his transformation.

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MARI CARLSON (December 21, 2022)

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