



Peaceful Waters

Anne Hutcheson

iUniverse

Hardcover \$26.99 (108pp)

978-1-66324-331-7

A novel about healing, Peaceful Waters follows as a woman seeks the personal power of accepting a great loss.

In Anne Hutcheson's novel *Peaceful Waters*, a woman deals with the unexpected loss of her boyfriend.

Donovan committed suicide. Unable to understand what drove him to that decision, Fen walks along the California coast by herself. Donovan's brother Cayden finds her and expresses worry; Fen agrees that she shouldn't grieve alone.

Cayden supports Fen as she donates Donovan's old clothing and tries to reintegrate into everyday life. Fen and Donovan had planned on sailing down the coast together, so when Fen retrieves a note in Donovan's handwriting that expresses his regret that he won't be able to take that trip with her, she is distraught. She decides to take the trip by herself to honor Donovan's memory, scatter his ashes, and rediscover life for herself. Still, she's haunted, remembering how she and Donovan used to dance together and make love. She sees his shadow everywhere. When she finds out that Donovan was unhappy because he lost patients at work, and when she finds the ring that he kept hidden from her, her emotional turmoil deepens.

Though it reflects Fen's melancholia, the novel's pace is quite slow, drawing out the process of Fen trying to focus on work and move past her grief. She also distances herself from friends like Meredith, thinking that doing so is essential if she's going to stay focused. There are some compelling but underdeveloped scenes related to these struggles: Meredith is bold when it comes to Fen, even severe with her, but their conflict is abandoned, rather than resolved, as the book progresses.

Fen sets sail halfway through the book, after which the narrative becomes even more inward and reflective. Her decision to leave behind potential conflicts in her community—indeed, to abandon her friends and coworkers—leads to her being embedded in her memories alone, wondering about Donovan at length. But she also learns to see the world through her own eyes again—a hopeful step toward moving on.

The novel's second half is consumed by Fen's musings—and by Fen's chance encounters with others as she sails. She eats delicious food and engages with unfamiliar cultures. But these forays are whimsical and light in comparison to the grief she's contending with—a forceful device for reminding her about life's beauty and wonder. The troubling circumstances of Donovan's life and suicide seem to have been forgotten as she moves toward self-acceptance and a new life with her cherished ones.

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ALEENA ORTIZ (October 6, 2023)

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