

Rain Line

Anne Whitney Pierce

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Drunk and depressed, Harvard hockey star Danny McPhee drives his car off a bridge and into a river after a victory party, drowning in the blackened waters. His girlfriend, artistic but insecure Leonarda Baye, fights her way to shore, only to discover that escaping death is but the first step on a tortuous path to survival and recovery.

Pierce, author of the 1994 short story collection *Galaxy Girls: Wonder Women*, here presents a touching and superbly crafted tale of a young woman's quest to come to grips with tragedy and rebuild her life. Woven into the narrative are the struggles of a compelling cast of characters: Leo's eccentric parents; her new boyfriend, a chess master fearful that Danny's shadow will forever loom over their relationship; the proud, embittered McPhee family.

Leo, a Cambridge native, feels unable to cope alone after the crash and returns to the Victorian house she had abandoned at age seventeen to escape her parents. Her father, mild-mannered and well-meaning, has devoted most of his adult life to two equally unsuccessful enterprises: inventions and restoring the mental health of his wife, once a budding opera singer who suffered a breakdown on stage and now drifts in a never-ending fog of confusion.

Slowly, Leo manages to coexist with her mother and resumes violin studies at the Boston Conservatory, drafting a thesis and practicing for the audition that could open the way to a successful career or doom her to obscurity. She also forges tenuous ties with the McPhees, a blue-collar Irish-American family who run a fish market. Her situation becomes drastically more complicated with the discovery that she is pregnant with Danny's child. Ultimately, with her own inner strength and help from some unlikely sources, Leo breaks guilt's oppressive grip and establishes a basis for moving ahead, as do, in their own ways, the people closest to her.

Aside from the compelling plot and characters, what makes this novel a joy to read is the vividness and clarity of Pierce's prose. One can almost feel Leo's panic as she relives the crash in her dreams, the frustration as she labors to carry on a coherent conversation with the mother who repeatedly addresses her by the wrong name. Surely one of the most powerfully written passages describes Leo's playing of her audition piece, "Waterfall Symphony," before an unforgiving panel of judges: "I reached the plateau safely, trembling on the misty ledges, a light staccato, dawn breaking on shallow rapids, dancing to the falls. I took a deep breath, middle finger steady on a two measure F, and plunged down into the falls."

A realist might quibble that things turn out a bit too happily for such troubled characters. Even so, *Rain Line* remains a powerful, at times gripping, story of courage and coping, one that rightly professes faith in the indomitability of the human spirit.

JOHN FLESHER (March / April 2000)

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