

Reunion

P. W. Walters

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Reunion is a tragic novel about a young man marked by abuse who, in his adulthood, is still trying to learn to live for himself.

In P. W. Walters's harrowing novel *Reunion*, a young man tries to recover from his childhood traumas.

Owen, born out of violation and forced into a world of loneliness and fear, is a brilliant, quiet boy whose entire life is shaped by abuse from his adult caretakers and his classmates and peers. The accidental death of his sister sets this cycle into motion. His parents also die when he's young, leaving Owen to move between caregivers, each of whom finds a new way to abuse him. He suffers rape, beatings, and isolation and comes to believe that he cannot be loved. He finds solace in books. Owen experiences a brief period of happiness when the Crowley family adopts him, but his new father dies and his mother descends into depression and dementia.

What made Owen an outcast in primary school is accepted, even valued, by his high school peers and teachers. When one of his childhood bullies resurfaces, his steps toward happiness are ruined by rumors, lies, and the loss of the only girl he thought he could love. Owen transfers to a new high school and later graduates with a nursing degree, allowing him to care for and protect children in a way that he never experienced.

Though based in truth, the novel is harsh in its focus on childhood abuse. Owen comes of age in the 1960s and 1970s, and his experiences are all the more tragic because of the period's marked lack of public discourse and mental health support. Inside, Owen struggles to decide who he can talk to, and if it is even safe to do so.

Owen's abusers are archetypal: evil characters who represent children's worst nightmares. They contribute to the story's heavy-handedness. Owen bounces between abusive environments and moments of happiness with speed and frequency, and the cycle becomes predictable. Even when he finds love, something takes it away, and he falls into a new, abusive relationship. A final reunion is unsurprising but confusing, given that Owen spent the entire book rejecting, often to the point of violence, his former abusers.

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HOLLY JORDAN (December 31, 2019)

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