

Sailor Girl

Sheree-Lee Olson

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"There is always a moment when the night threatens to go aground. A closing-time moment, when the bar lights go bright and you can see who you've been drinking with, yelling your personal details to over the noise of the band. It could go either way..." So observes nineteen-year-old photography student Kate McLeod, who has signed on as a ship's porter five years after the *Edmund Fitzgerald* disaster. Working to pay her way through school and somewhat directionally adrift, Kate drinks, sows oats with a natural propensity toward losers, and struggles for respect among a cast of hardtack characters. Her moral imperfections are so intertwined with deep-seated goodwill and stifled aspirations that it's impossible not to root for her wholeheartedly.

Kate's freighters are an eighth of a mile long. They constantly motor up and down the Great Lakes, conveying material between rust ports (iron ore cargo) and dust ports (grain) in all weather. Her occasional objections to industrial development fall on unsympathetic ears. The arduous work everyone accepts; it's complications arising from loneliness and grudges which aren't as easy to take in stride.

This engrossing coming of age story has real literary merit, though frankly described sexuality has it straddling the line between a general adult audience and perhaps the most mature of young adult readers. *Sailor Girl* balances between salty action with lyrical perception, as when Kate meets the antagonist: "...he came toward her along the companionway, wearing a white tee, light from the portholes strobing across his cheekbones. She would always remember the first sight of him, like a strip of negatives, dark and light, dark and light."

The book has two minor plot flaws: a dangerous situation bubbling away in the background resolves itself in an anticlimactic confrontation, and a tension-raising home invasion is dismissed as a red herring. But those are just passing beeps on the sonar of a fascinating larger picture of life on the water. The longtime Toronto *Globe and Mail* editor, who paid for her own education as the protagonist does, shows herself to be a talented prose stylist whose credibly complex characters refuse to follow in anyone else's wake.

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