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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ ROMANCE

Sandcastles

H. H. Campbell
CreateSpace (Dec 23, 2011)
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Taara Kenlen has accomplished so much in her fifty-eight years. Husband? Check. Family? Check. House, car, country club membership? Check, check, and check. Her to-do list is complete, yet Taara feels something is missing. Instead of being content to retire with her politically successful husband, Dexter, Taara is drawn to the past in this romantic tale of rekindled passion.

Campbell introduces the still-lovely Taara at midlife, as she ponders her younger years, particularly her feelings for an old flame, Cameron Bourne. He was her first kiss, first love, and first husband. After thirty-five frustrating years with her second husband, it takes surprisingly little—one phone call—to put Taara on the path to finding out what went wrong with husband number one and how she can make it right.

One phone call leads to another and, eventually, to a meeting. Taara and Cameron talk almost nonstop in their effort to catch up on the years they've missed. Campbell writes much of their story in dialogue, as they tease each other with remembered phrases and make confessions about choices they each regret. The quick pace of the dialogue makes the pages turn as the lovers tell each other everything.

The intimacy shared by Taara and Cameron contrasts sharply with the distant relationship Taara has with Dexter. Campbell offers a bleak portrait of Taara's marriage to Dexter, who appears only in an unflattering light. His aloof, angry manner clearly shows the reasons Taara considers divorcing him. The one-sided presentation of Dexter's personality, however, may leave readers wondering why she has stayed with him for so long. Likewise, mentions of Taara and Dexter's daughter, Ava, are few and vague, painting a less than complete picture of life in the Kenlen household.

Some lack of detail may be intentional, as Campbell's main character has suffered from clinical depression, an ailment that saps much of the color from life. Campbell nails the details of depression treatment, such as Taara's counseling sessions and medication regimens. The author also captures the more subtle, inner experience. In one particularly effective scene, Campbell uses the weather to illustrate Taara's struggle. A series of incredibly foggy days leaves Taara blind to the outside world, but then gives way to clear skies and sunshine that echo her internal breakthrough.

Campbell carefully builds the passion between Taara and Cameron, with bedroom scenes becoming more explicit as the story moves along. Never vulgar, the descriptions of their unions are bathed in the same nostalgic glow that defines their whole relationship.

While a conventional romantic light shines on nearly everything here, Campbell saves some surprises for the end of the book. Clearly, Taara has a lot more to add to her to-do list.

SHEILA M. TRASK (May 10, 2012)

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