

Social Work

Thomas Duffy

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Social Work is a thoughtful novel about self-understanding and the need to be understood by others.

Thomas Duffy's novel *Social Work* concerns the personal and professional relationship between a hospital therapist and her most complex patient.

After a suicide attempt, Marc is introduced to Lauren, the social worker tasked with helping him get his life back on track. While he's at first reluctant to open up, Marc soon shares his desires for a grander life with Lauren. He also expresses interest in her as a friend. Both aspirations prove difficult for Lauren to handle; she reflects that Marc is her most interesting patient in some time.

Once Marc is released from the hospital, he has to forge his path without constant guidance. Meanwhile, Lauren's time listening to what Marc wanted from his life prompts her to look inward and ask herself what's missing from her own life. Both characters aspire to grow and make use of what they learned from one another.

Personal healing and growth take precedent in this story about overcoming mental illness, though its underlying theme of expectations is as important. Part of what drives Marc to attempt suicide is his depression, which is attributed to personal dissatisfaction and a feeling that, despite his negative choices, he deserves more than what he has; this feeling continues to haunt him throughout his rehabilitation.

Lauren, too, is unsatisfied with her situation. She has a job that she enjoys, but no relationships that are meaningful enough, and she fears the possibility of settling in life. Both characters' battles with unrealistic expectations are resonant. Both dark and light humor are employed throughout, emphasizing that not everything is either all happy or entirely sad, while pop cultural references and witty banter help to make the novel relevant.

Characters' thoughts and feelings are expressed in open terms, making understanding them effortless. However, though they're dealing with hefty issues, the characters have limited depth. Marc rests in his attempts to figure out who he is and what he wants, while Lauren's backstory is limited, her motivations explored only in terms of how they serve the book's overarching themes. Analyses of Lauren's therapy methods, and Marc's mental condition, are minimal.

The novel deals with complex subject matters, including love, heartbreak, suicide, and healing, and its ending feels hasty in comparison, summing up years in a handful of pages. Still, *Social Work* is a thoughtful novel about self-understanding and the need to be understood by others, in which finding a happy medium between grandiose expectations and reality is made central.

IAN DAILEY (June 5, 2020)

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