



Solace of Stone: A story about making choices.

David de Wolf

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This beautifully described coming-of-age story serves as a rich and fascinating guide through Europe's cultural landscape.

Heavily influenced by the European arts scene, *Solace of Stone* is a coming-of-age story accompanied by the music, architecture, and visual masterpieces of France and Italy.

George, a mediocre architect, struggles with an uninspiring career and marriage, even as a burden from the past haunts him. Charlotte, an art historian, grapples with her desire for companionship even as she finds herself being used by a playboy opera singer. Each must find their way through a haze of grand hopes and expectations to discover their true priorities.

Beautifully realized descriptions of art, architecture, and music overwhelm in this atmosphere piece. The setting exudes high-class sophistication and an enchantment with a culture where everyone speaks four languages and flies to Rome for the frescoes. It's intoxicating, almost like reading about royalty. Familiarity with classical European culture is not necessary, but enhances the experience.

George, Charlotte, and their worlds can come across as pretentious. George's contempt for his brother, Tom's, band, for example, may inspire some lovers of modern music to wonder if George would question their own taste, and the level to which Charlotte and pianist Lasek communicate through music alone seems implausibly telepathic. Nevertheless, the ultra-refinement of the cast highlights the fact that their perceived intellectual superiority can't insulate them from human pain. In fact, genius occurs so often in conjunction with emotional frigidity that good breeding and cruelty seem to predict one another. Since this effect is commonplace in the book, human connection becomes all the more valuable.

George and Charlotte are the most average characters presented here, adequate and educated people who never became the geniuses they were intended to be, but they are also the only personae who do not end up alone.

The book's structure is split evenly between George and Charlotte. Their stories aren't so much intertwined as independent, each with minimal entanglement in the other. The exceptions to this rule are the first and last chapters, in which George and Charlotte meet, and occasional offhand mentions of each character during the other's arc. This makes it somewhat difficult to reconcile *Solace of Stone* as a single story. Their reconnection, though fitting with the rest of the story, feels somewhat contrived, especially during the final chapter, which the characters spend philosophically recapping their personal development.

Despite some messiness when bringing the plots together, this book is worth a read, particularly before a trip across the pond. It functions not only as an exploration of meaningful human interaction, but as a rich and fascinating guide through Europe's cultural landscape.

ANNA CALL (April 4, 2014)

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