



Swallow

Tonya Plank

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Many of us know what it's like to have a mouthful of angry words you'd like to let fly, but few of us bite back those words quite as harshly as Sophie Hegel, poor Arizonian turned (almost) sophisticated New York City lawyer.

Sophie's words lodge so firmly in her throat that she has trouble swallowing and loses weight at a rapid rate, causing many of her friends to urge her to get help for anorexia. Eventually the dam excludes spoken words, and, horrifyingly, air to breathe; every social and professional encounter becomes a struggle for poise in the face of discomfort.

Perhaps her problem lies with her relationship with her father. A producer of pornographic movies, John left his wife and daughters in their dusty Arizona town to live in L.A. and date the actresses who star in his x-rated films. Or maybe Sophie's issues are to do with her fiancé, who works in a high-powered law office and makes quietly disparaging remarks about Sophie's meager paycheck.

Sophie does sense that her problems are with the men in her life, since she refers to the blockage in her throat as a "he." In fact, she gives it a name: FB, short for Fist Ball. It ultimately takes a tragedy for Sophie to release some of her pent-up words of anger, to stand up for herself, to free herself from the opinions of others.

Tonya Plank, author of the popular blog *Swan Lake Samba Girl*, is an exuberant writer who injects so much gusto into her characters that occasionally they teeter on the edge of caricature without quite tipping over. For example, Sophie overreacts to a shopping question at her own engagement party: "I mean, Heaven forbid I don't know who designed my shoes!" I screamed. But when I saw her receding smile, her chin pointed down, shoulders hunched over, hair shielding nipples, I felt horrible." Plank keeps them from crossing that line of ridiculous, and as a result Sophie and her friends are believable, complex, and highly entertaining.

Swallow is peppered with discussions on advanced theories of aesthetics that, surprisingly, never detract from the up-tempo story. Plank has a knack for combining philosophical opinions, hard-luck family stories, discount shopping triumphs, and gently slapstick humor into a book that makes readers laugh, think, and swallow hard in sympathy.

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