

## The Canoe

**Michelle Baker**

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*Parallel stories regarding the sinking of the Titanic elegantly show the grief process and how we reflect on mortality.*

Michelle Baker's *The Canoe* takes us from land to sea with its dual narrative voices of Katherine Chambers, a widow aboard the notoriously doomed *Titanic*, and Bernie Kingston, a young man coming of age in a Chesapeake Bay town. Katherine is grieving the deaths of both husband and son and trying to move beyond the heaviness of loss, while Bernie is full of teenage energy and desires. Bernie helps his father with the pragmatically somber task of coffin building—work that makes him reflect upon mortality every now and then, but by no means represses his own will to live.

In this slim novel, imagery and dialogue are weighted with almost poetic significance. This is not an exhaustive tale of the *Titanic* and its staggering loss of lives, nor is it a deliberate intertwining of stories. Instead, *The Canoe* offers more of a sense of parallel moments, focusing on the same event happening beneath the same April sky, yet with very different levels of intensity.

There is the immediate vortex of the tragedy itself, and there are the reports making their way to shore, followed by newspaper articles and word of mouth, rumor, and misinformation. In 1912, a simpler, far less media-dominated time, a major tragedy was indeed major, even from a distance. *The Canoe* keeps true to its era through Bernie's reaction to the sinking:

*We stood as a troop of defeated soldiers. I saw the weathered profiles of my friends' parents, gray hair fluttering beneath shawls and scarfs ... I sobbed out-loud [sic] as an uncontrolled wave of tears shook my body ... [W]e lowered our heads and held our tongues.*

A quietly intriguing character, Katherine is also one of *The Canoe*'s strong points. Her brief moments of happiness aboard the ship are all the more poignant as tragedy looms, tearing her from the community of luxury among her fellow passengers to an ocean full of death and "yellow life vests, red cushions, chaise lounges, tables and table cloths, fruit, hats, shoes and corpses—people we dined, danced and sang with just hours before." Though hopeful to escape sorrow as the boat sails, her journey ends with mourning and numbness again.

Finally, the mysterious canoe itself is a brief and subtle metaphor of family and survival on yet another level. Its emptiness brings it to shore as a symbol of death and drowning, while on another bank of the Chesapeake, its passengers simply thank the waters for sparing their lives this time.

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