

The Hook: Surfing to Survive a Shattered Family, Drugs, Gangs and the FBI

Kathleen Doler

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The Hook is a universally enjoyable novel that has a lot to say about the human condition, contemporary society, and the throes of addiction.

Kathleen Doler's enthralling and suspenseful *The Hook* blends literary fiction, crime, and adventure sports in a captivating fashion. It reads like a thriller, but also moves to ascend to the great, cliff-like heights of literature.

The metaphor of surfing hangs ten over the novel, especially the idea that fortune can be a wipeout wave that slams down on the unsuspecting. The plot centers on damaged people who want to escape their troubled family background while staying true to those they care about. The well-rendered familial drama plays out against the backdrop of a dangerous underworld filled with drug-related crime, significantly raising the stakes.

Dana, a journalist who left long ago to make it big in Los Angeles, returns to her hometown in northern California after her drug-addled brother, Shane, who had been a promising surfing star, ends up in the hospital with a badly broken arm and a lot of unanswered questions. He finds himself basically homeless, in the crosshairs of a meth kingpin, and in way over his head. Only his sister wants to help. Dana refuses to abandon Shane as a budding gang war, an FBI investigation, and familial conflict all propel the plot forward.

Descriptive prose shines; Half Moon Bay, for example, is "a community of ruddy complexions and calloused hands, fishing and farming." The well-crafted, clever, and often amusing writing rings of authenticity, particularly in its visceral depictions of what it's like to ride the waves, and in its richly detailed introduction to surfer culture.

The novel's social observation is adept, giving a good feel for people who live to surf: the adrenaline rush they get, what it's like out there on the water, their carefree lifestyles, and the often spartan "ratholes" in which they live. The book does not gloss over drug use, exposing a seedy underbelly that takes the story to dark places.

Throughout *The Hook*, Dana displays a strong and relatable voice, often showing a sardonic wit and the cynicism of a hard-boiled noir detective. Characters are well developed, given history and motivation, and allowed to grow over the course of the narrative.

The Hook vividly renders its motley cast, Dana's hometown, and different settings, such as the titular Hook where the surfers catch waves. Scenes set in newsrooms stand out for their keenly accurate verisimilitude, capturing the ever-present contemporary anxiety over the threat of layoffs.

The novel is excellently plotted and paced, with chapter openings that are often as attention-grabbing and dramatic as newspaper leads. Chapter lengths are generally kept short and punchy, and chapters often end on cliffhangers, leaving the reader wanting more. The dialogue generally sparkles but sometimes owes a debt to pulp fiction, straddling the line between cliché and creativity.

The Hook is a universally enjoyable, rock-solid novel that has a lot to say about the human condition, contemporary

society, the throes of addiction, and personal growth. It's an exciting ride, like a surfer coasting in the pocket of a rolling wave.

JOSEPH S. PETE (April 28, 2017)

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