

The Last Wave

Gillian Best

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In Gillian Best's *The Last Wave*, raw human emotion teems just underneath the lapping surface of modern English life.

After accidentally falling into the sea while fishing with her father, Martha begins a lifelong romance with the salty waves. Despite her mother's insistence that she take a traditional path, Martha dreams of swimming the English Channel. Even after marrying John, having children, and accepting domestic duties, she never loses that desire. The obsession sustains her through cancer, her husband's Alzheimer's, and a rift with her daughter, Harriet, formed because John will not accept Harriet's relationship with another woman.

The novel is beautifully poignant. Its emotional undercurrents are presented in a quietly powerful style, free of manufactured melodrama. Details are carefully chosen and breathe life into depictions of Dover and France. Martha's myrtle bush, a plant usually found near the sea, is a lovely recurring symbol of the connections, however loose, that hold her family together. It takes on human form in Harriet's daughter, Myrtle, an eager young swimmer who establishes a link between Harriet's wife, Iris, and Martha.

Though Martha is the binding centrality here, windows into her family's perspectives are opened. This is particularly effective with John, who is at risk of being painted primarily as an antagonistic husband hell-bent on maintaining a traditional household. His sections of the novel brim with sympathetic sadness, especially once his Alzheimer's surfaces.

For Harriet, navigating the waters of intolerance proves challenging. And while Alzheimer's steals John's chance to reach a point of acceptance, it softens the resentment Harriet has for him.

The Last Wave, like the sea that holds Martha in its grip, is both gently stirring and tumultuous, a harsh yet alluring voyage through the decades of a woman's life.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (March/April 2018)

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