



The Mermaids of Lake Michigan

Suzanne Kamata

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In *The Mermaids of Lake Michigan*, Suzanne Kamata explores one girl's coming of age in the 1970s with heartbreaking detail. Trapped by her mother's hopes, heroine Elise learns to embrace her own destiny to realize her dreams, even if those choices result in pain and tragedy.

Seventeen-year-old Elise has grown accustomed to disappointing her former beauty queen mother. Instead of cultivating a social life filled with parties, fashionable clothes, and popular friends, she spends her time reading novels and writing letters to pen pals in faraway countries. Her introverted existence comes to an end, however, when her mother engineers an introduction to wild child Chiara. The unlikely friendship with the bohemian girl pushes Elise out of her comfort zone and encourages her to experience the free-spirited aspects of life. This journey ultimately leads her into the arms of an itinerant musician—an encounter that will forever change her future.

While Elise's friendship with Chiara forms the foundation of the novel, running throughout the narrative are strong threads about the untapped potential of women and how these possibilities are affected and limited by men. Part of the reason Elise's mother places such pressure upon her daughters is because her own potential was thwarted by circumstance. Her attempts to overcome the situation floundered in an era when feminism had yet to find stable footing and people still found the idea of women balancing family and career novel. Never outright elucidated, the subtle implications of her mother's history add depth and complexity to the influences that shape Elise's choices.

Elise's adventures with Chiara make her dreamlike meeting with wandering musician Miguel seem inevitable. Her sudden and earnest feelings for him are also expected, although modern sensibilities may find the portrayal of Miguel's cultural background uncomfortable. The seductive, thieving Romany character type has become a distasteful cliché, but the retro setting of *The Mermaids of Lake Michigan* may mitigate this impression. Despite the problematic aspects of their relationship, Elise's young love for Miguel echoes her mother's past and raises questions about whether she will repeat those same mistakes.

Even though Chiara serves as the impetus for Elise coming out of her shell, her presence in the novel fades as Elise's romantic woes take center stage. Given her vivid nature, the loss is keenly felt as Elise often needs a character foil to feel fully fleshed out. On the other hand, the increased role later played by her younger sister Amanda adds another dimension to the familial dynamic. In some ways, the shift fuels anticipation for more sibling or mother-daughter interaction, but those desires may be left unsatisfied.

Kamata's introspective prose compliments Elise's coming of age tale in *The Mermaids of Lake Michigan*. Unrealized hopes and dreams clash with reality, forming the picture of a girl trapped between her mother's wishes and her personal goals. In the end, Elise discovers that while she is the product of the women who've come before her, she is her own person who doesn't have to repeat the mistakes of the past.

VERNIEDA VERGARA (February 7, 2017)

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