

This Must Be the Place

Susan Jackson Rodgers

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Warm and occasionally edgy, this self-discovery-on-the-road novel evokes meaningful memories.

In Susan Jackson Rodgers's quirky *This Must Be The Place*, Thea Knox has just graduated college and is on a solo road trip from California to New York, sampling slices of truck stop and diner pies as she drives across the American landscape.

Thea's trip involves a significant detour to the college town of Merdale, Kansas, where her Aunt Wendy is employed by the university. Fate and a serious attraction to Jimmy Ward leave Thea caught up in an intense summer fling.

Beyond the exciting and sudden passion, Thea has the opportunity to avoid another romantic commitment waiting for her in New York—with Eddie, a medical student and the brother of her best friend, Emily. Unsure about her feelings, Thea worries about hurting Eddie, and that she might lose Emily's friendship as a consequence of the breakup.

Rodgers's characters give *This Must Be The Place* a memorable dimension. Descriptions of Merdale are well detailed, making it a curious cross of semirural and academic. Thea herself is appealingly flawed, with an interesting balance of free-spiritedness and responsibility. The narrative's warm flow of language is undercut by an occasionally edgy uncertainty as Thea works out her romantic conflicts and discovers certain secrets about Jimmy's past and present life.

While there are early 1980s references in *This Must Be The Place*— Ronald Reagan's presidency, boom boxes, and the novel's title, taken from the classic Talking Heads song—it is the decade's lack of Internet, cellphones, and social media that effectively complicates the plot. Landline phone calls are missed or avoided with ease, letters and postcards take days or weeks to be delivered, and the ability to sleuth online to learn more about a person is years away. People are also able to seemingly vanish without a trace.

Thea's journey to and from Merdale is a worthwhile trip, like many memories of short summers that remain meaningful for a lifetime.

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