

Trails of the Soul

Karen D. Hamilton

yes and also press

(188pp)

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Trails of the Soul is an empowering romance novel about second chances.

A divorcee and recent empty nester find renewed purpose on a Colorado vacation in Karen D. Hamilton's brisk romance novel about healing, *Trails of the Soul*.

When Taryn's adventuresome best friend, Paige, signs them up for a week-long vacation at a dude ranch, she welcomes the unexpected excursion. Taryn is intrigued from the outset by the ranch's head, Jesse, a former Chicago attorney-turned-cowboy who is also divorced. He, too, experiences an instant connection, though as the ranch's host, he reins in his emotions out of concern about propriety in front of the other guests.

But when a snowstorm brings Taryn and Jesse together at a remote cabin, it sets off extensive, heartfelt conversations that are paced like epiphanies. Some of these exchanges are inspired by knowledge that Jesse gained through spiritual conferences, though the specifics of his beliefs are detailed in vague terms. He discusses "soulic" exchanges, assumptions, and theories around Taryn's divorce, even reframing her husband's affair as a net positive that set them both free. These ideas are controversial and eye-opening for Taryn. She, in turn, gives Jesse new perspectives on his divorce and response to it, leading to watershed moments. Jesse is impressed by Taryn's wisdom. Still, the heavy idealism of their talks makes their passion feel inauthentic.

Indeed, Taryn and Jesse's thoughts and reactions to each other are often conveyed through expository, italicized passages. They come across as overly analytic and cautious people whose vulnerabilities are stated, rather than developed. Their misunderstandings and communication errors are minor and resolved with speed. Even so, these clashes drive the story, making it feel repetitive.

The book's secondary cast is made up of people who are constructed as colorful outlines. They include fellow ranch guests, a brusque corporate head who shows interest in Taryn, a married couple, and a group of Japanese coworkers. Their gossipy tendencies and interest in other people's fledgling romances is adolescent in tone, though their camaraderie is charming. Paige is a cast highlight as a forward-thinking, honest woman whose spontaneity counters Taryn's more subdued nature. A side plot involving the women's skills as event planners, and offer to help at the ranch, is rushed, functioning only to emphasize how much their experiences at the ranch benefited them.

Strongest at detailing Taryn's realizations about herself, which include how she seldom asserted herself in her first marriage, *Trails of the Soul* is an empowering romance novel about second chances and self-forgiveness.

KAREN RIGBY (June 8, 2021)

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