



Untying the Moon: A Novel

Ellen Malphrus

Pat Conroy, Contributor

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Settings that feel lived in, a nice eye for detail, and a story that's simple but evocative feed this character-rich first novel.

In *Untying the Moon*, Ellen Malphrus takes her protagonist Bailey Martin on a long journey of self-discovery. This is a debut novel that doesn't feel like one, as Malphrus writes with a fluid and confident prose, nicely balancing the backstory of Bailey's character with her attempts to find contentment.

During the course of the novel, Bailey travels down the East Coast to South Carolina and journeys to Alaska, along the way connecting or reconnecting with many of the important people in her life. The book establishes her early as both a lover of the open road and a traveler in search of a landing spot, and the other memorable characters feed into those dueling goals. Bailey begins a relationship with Padgett, a military veteran with dark tendencies and a penchant for violence. She visits her fisherman father Cecil, with whom her relationship has been somewhat distant since the death of her mother. Some of the book's most compelling characters are the family of neighbors who have known Bailey since she was little—her longtime friend Ben, and his parents, Retta and George.

All of these relationships are well crafted and appropriately complicated. The writing similarly makes each of the book's locations appealing in its own way, whether Bailey is watching dolphins and reflecting on her early goal of being the next Jacques Cousteau, or thinking about the damage the Exxon Valdez oil spill brings to her beloved Alaska. The story is set at the end of the 1980s, with a few sections written as flashbacks, a wise choice that lets Bailey's travels feel open-ended in a way that a novel set in the present would struggle to achieve. Historical events like the Exxon spill or Hurricane Hugo impact the story, but it's always about the character relationships first, and Malphrus never disappoints with those relationships.

Untying the Moon is a beautifully written first novel, with settings that feel lived in, a nice eye for detail, and a story that's simple but evocative. Ellen Malphrus describes herself as a "southern storyteller," and her work is a fine example of that literary tradition.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Spring 2016)

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