



Walker's Key

Frank B. Haddleton

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Hinging on the question of whether it is sometimes necessary to kill in order to stop evil, Walker's Key is a satisfying and dramatic historical novel.

Set in the Florida Keys, Frank B. Haddleton's suspenseful historical novel *Walker's Key* charts a difficult course between complex family relationships at the turn of the century.

The Walker family makes its home on Cape Cod, traveling often to Florida to fish. In the early 1900s, its patriarch, Kenelm, dies, ostensibly of suicide. His children, Darby and Tulley, wonder what will happen to the family's substantial fortune.

Tulley is a lighthouse keeper; just after his father's death, his light goes out, and the book depicts the brothers' relationship in the years leading up to its extinguishing. The will says that the estate will be divided evenly between the brothers, but only if they survive the week that follows. The Walkers have known their share of tragedy and betrayal; survival is no sure thing.

The book pivots to the mysteries of the Walkers' past. Tulley and Darby have a troubled relationship; Tulley bullies his younger brother and takes credit for his successes. Though Tulley discovers Darby in a compromising position and takes the information to Kenelm, Kenelm takes Darby's side. The family's elder men are revealed to be a men of principle who accept people's differences; the brother's grandfather also fought slavery, despite period challenges to such thinking. Such details are anachronistic but hopeful.

At its heart, the novel is a study of complex family relationships. Its characters have depth as they deal with complicated issues of race, sexuality, and history. Secondary characters include bigoted Eleazer Walker and Nathaniel, who helped to free slaves and got branded for it. Eccentric Freeman Scott befriends Darby, teaching him about Walker family skeletons and helping him to develop the wisdom he needs to accept himself. There's historical texture to all of their interactions, and no character is either wholly good or evil.

Nineteenth-century maritime life is conveyed through clear descriptions, as is life on land in Massachusetts and Florida. Funny conveyances of past events mix with moments of excessive detail, though, and the pivot to the past is abrupt. The story is clearest when it sticks to its chronology.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (February 20, 2020)

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