

Water is Wider

Marie Green McKeon

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In Water is Wider, two women form an unexpected bond and redefine the meaning of family.

Marie Green McKeon's *Water is Wider* is an intimate novel in which a young girl and a middle-aged woman come into each other's lives and form a special bond.

Phoebe and Sidney are at turning points in their lives. At eleven, Phoebe is distraught over the sudden disappearance of her father; her stepmother, Adele, locks her in the attic after she becomes overwhelmed by Phoebe's questioning. Phoebe breaks out of the house and runs away, determined to find her father.

Meanwhile, Sidney is living in a small Pennsylvania town; single and childless, she finds herself unmoored after her mother's death and when her work life is thrown into chaos. Poppy Press, where she is a proofreader, descends into bankruptcy and begins layoffs. Phoebe and Sidney's paths cross and a bond forms; they help each other navigate through major transitions.

While the novel's setup, including the police brushing off Phoebe's disappearance, requires the suspension of disbelief, Phoebe's story is compelling from the first as she searches for answers regarding her father's disappearance, while Sidney's reflections now that she is no longer caring for her mother are realistic, capturing her loneliness and grief. Because of their realistic conversations and the descriptive language around them, Phoebe and Sidney are emotionally rich, and the ways that their lives come together are satisfying.

The point of view changes from chapter to chapter to include Phoebe, Sidney, Sidney's coworkers, and Phoebe's stepmother. Phoebe's stepmother provides interesting background and insights. Many peripheral characters are more types than dynamic in and of themselves; they raise topics like mental illness and workplace violence, but some related conversations are forced.

Several voices are included to highlight the inner workings of Poppy Press. They cover mundane lunchroom conversations, detailed descriptions of how Sidney's coworkers plan to save the business, and a coworker who displays bizarre behavior. That this much emphasis is placed on the inner workings of Poppy Press shifts the story's balance and stalls its early suspense. Some voices are missing, including that of Phoebe's father, though his story line raises sensitive and complex topics.

Not all of the story's threads are tied up, including how Phoebe processes the information she receives about her missing father, but the heartwarming end does bring the focus back to Sidney and Phoebe's relationship.

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EMILY WEBBER (December 10, 2019)

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