

Water Music: A Cape Cod Story

Marcia Peck

Sea Crow Press (Jul 5, 2023)

Softcover \$19.95 (245pp)

979-898656768-6

Music helps a family to heal their broken bonds, moving past hurt silences, in the lovely novel Water Music.

A summer holiday on Cape Cod tests a family's wills and loyalties in Marcia Peck's tender novel *Water Music*.

In 1956, Lily's family continues a recent summer tradition: staying on the shores of their pond on Cape Cod. They make preparations to build a cottage there, even though they can't afford the project. But Lily is lonely: her asthmatic sister and cousin prefer each other's company to hers, and her shy attempts to bond with her volatile mother are spoiled by the specter of the elder's unhappy relationship with her own mother.

Further, failures to keep up appearances—and to keep up with each other—create pressures between Lily's family members, who have few healthy outlets for their many grievances. They try to push past their everyday squabbles but end up escalating from verbal to physical expressions of their tensions, leaving Lily feeling adrift and unsure of what to do. In time, Lily's family members are forced to reconsider what it is that they hold dear.

The Cape Cod setting is vivified with mentions of its ever-changing sights, sounds, and smells. Music, too, plays a supporting role: for Lily, the cello brings feelings of both inadequacy and accomplishment; her mother and her troubled aunt view music as their only escape from the stifling realities of distracted husbands and lingering mental illness. Further, the book uses the Beaufort wind force scale as a clever metaphorical measure of its escalating tensions.

Between family feuds, mandatory cello lessons, and her upcoming birthday, Lily—contending with more than any eleven-year-old could be expected to deal with—narrates. She navigates grown-up problems that she has only a vague understanding of but still blames herself for. She is a complex, endearing heroine: sensitive yet selfish, she knows what is right but cannot always make herself do or believe in the right choice. There's a fragile, heartbreaking quality to her narration, which culminates with a terrifying literal storm that sweeps away her family's fragile veneer of normalcy. The resulting waves of guilt, grief, and reconciliation lead to a transcendent finale—a beautiful close to an often dark and painful tale.

In the eloquent novel *Water Music*, a dysfunctional family faces financial and emotional ruin, even as they seek their own version of salvation.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (December 5, 2023)

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