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What Matters Most

Courtney Walsh
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A widow returns to her husband's Nantucket cottage in hopes of restarting her life in *What Matters Most*, Courtney Walsh's wholesome, piercing romance novel about atonement and restored faith.

After five years of grieving, Emma is determined to remake herself for the sake of her son, CJ. She sets a goal of gaining independence in the span of a year, which will include fixing up the garage apartment to use as a rental. She invites Jamie, a former photojournalist with PTSD (who, unbeknownst to Emma, knew her husband, Cam—and who knows what happened on the day that Cam died), to help with the renovation; this leads to an attraction. Despite Emma's guilt about feeling happy again and Jamie's reticence, their relationship grows.

The text alternates between Jamie and Emma's thoughts about each other. They weigh their mixed feelings and withhold secrets from each other; they contend with self-blame and senses of unworthiness. Their delay to disclose painful truths makes their relationship authentic; their shared outings, and the apartment project, draw forth their compatible artistic temperaments. Despite their backstories and Cam's tragic military mission, references to how faith helps people to overcome their trials results in a sense of meaning.

Emma's job at an art gallery and an impending local art festival result in a poignant subplot about artists who've lost their connection to their creativity, but who find it refreshed with encouragement. And the Nantucket scenery threads into their work, underscoring how beauty leads to awakenings. Though some people's confessions are abrupt, and though Jamie and Emma's relationship problems linger, the book works toward a thoughtful ending in which reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing are possible.

What Matters Most is a tender and charming romance novel whose troubled characters inspire hope.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2022)

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