

What We All Have

Ray Dacolias

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What We All Have explores and dissects how humans relate to illness and death, touching on themes of connectedness and reaching outside one's self to find fulfillment.

Ray Dacolias's *What We All Have* is an intimate novel that examines desires for connection and the struggles presented by illness. With themes of mortality and human dignity, the work operates with weighty prose and rich, provocative metaphors.

Tony believes that he is terminally ill, though doctors say otherwise, even suggesting that he seek psychological counseling. Instead, he retreats into himself, entering into a relationship with his illness, which takes on the persona of a scorned lover, selfishly keeping him to herself and forcing him to live in a private world of resentment and regret. Then Tony meets Lake, who is actually sick. Once beautiful and wealthy, she regrets the loss of her carefree lifestyle and has a similarly intimate relationship with her illness.

Thrown together against their will and better judgment, Tony and Lake struggle to connect with each other. Lake doesn't feel worthy of love or friendship, and Tony struggles to balance his concern for Lake with concerns over his own health. They trade snarky banter and engage in manic dialogue. Both convey their confused inner struggles, though their discussions aren't always easy to follow, and don't often feel organic.

Beautiful and selfless moments in the text contrast with desperate and morbid monologues that paint humanity with exaggerated intensity. Tony and Lake wallow in their own very specific forms of misery, and can become tedious as a result. Descriptive tangents bring their obsessiveness into focus, and offer a picture of their isolation, but are not always relatable. The text is thick with metaphor and whole chapters are devoted to Tony conversing with his disease, and such passages tend to be heavy-handed.

Similarly, Lake spends a great deal of time ruminating about her lost youth and the "belle of the ball" lifestyle that she misses. She attached a great deal of her self-worth to her beauty. He, to the importance of his failing health. Both remain unable to separate their illnesses from their value as people until their lives intertwine and they are compelled to help each other. Through a rocky period of learning to accept help from each other, the two ultimately realize that they are better people and have more to value in themselves if they can connect and care for another person.

What We All Have explores and dissects how humans relate to illness and death, touching on themes of connectedness and reaching outside one's self to find fulfillment in the well-being of others, and celebrates how similar all human beings are.

SARA BUDZIK (August 23, 2016)

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