

What We Give, What We Take

Randi Triant

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In Randi Triant's novel *What We Give, What We Take*, a young mother defies the political, economic, and personal forces arrayed against her.

Fay is a single mother who works as a water tank escape artist. Living in ramshackle trailer parks, she struggles to earn enough to support herself and her son, Dickie. She's haunted by the unfortunate decision that denied him protection from polio.

As the war in Vietnam rages, Fay and her best friend, Ginny, a contortionist, head out to entertain the troops as part of a ragtag carnival. Fay leaves fifteen-year-old Dickie in the care of her abusive boyfriend to do so. Dickie wants to believe that she left for him, but he once caught Ginny kissing his unresponsive mother: "Even at four years old I saw what Fay would give and what she took."

The book depicts the realities of war with striking intensity. Fay, amid death and destruction, confronts her past, which was marked by bad decisions, loss, and her latent attraction to women. Trapped in a binding contract, she seeks a way home to Dickie, but is thwarted by an event that almost costs her life.

Dickie, after years of abuse from his sadistic caregiver, retaliates, assumes a false name, and flees—first to Florida; then to New York City, where he is taken in by an eccentric artist; and later to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he lives among artists, drag queens, and drug addicts, reasoning "The hell with the past. All you have is the present. Deal with it." In this novel, though, the past and present are bound to collide.

At once tender, cruel, sensitive, and raw, *What We Give, What We Take* is a searing novel in which wounded people make hard decisions in order to survive.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2022)

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