



When Mermaids Sing

Mark Zvonkovic

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In Mark Zvonkovic's chatty debut novel, set in New England during the early 1970s, junior high school teacher Larry Brown is involved with the self-absorbed Millie, an affair which appears to be going nowhere. As the story unfolds, readers learn more about the bland Larry and his relationship with his cousin and best friend Bradley, an idealistic but troubled young man who yearns to find truth and inner peace.

Halfway through the book the main storyline about a cult finally surfaces when Larry meets Jenny, a young woman who is trying to convince her brother Josh to leave a cult that calls itself "The Path." Coincidentally, this is the same cult that Bradley recently joined when he lived in California. With the help of Sam Henry, a deprogrammer with a slew of legal problems, Larry and Jenny kidnap Josh and Bradley from the clutches of the Path and its leader, Misha.

While Zvonkovic hints at this cult story early in the novel, he gets bogged down with Larry's relationships through back stories, extraneous scenes, and snippets of conversation that don't tie in to the novel's theme. Zvonkovic's dialogue has a natural rhythm and flow, but it leaves the reader wondering when the nitty-gritty of the story will appear. Zvonkovic also has the tendency to introduce characters that have no part in the story, like Millie's roommate Hannah, who seems to be merely a sounding board for Larry. All the reader knows about Millie is that she is more of a nag than a comfort in Larry's life. Zvonkovic doesn't delve much into the psychology of the relationship and what keeps them together

The story's pace picks up with the introduction of Sam Henry and his deprogramming methods. It's through Sam's conversations with Larry that Zvonkovic weaves in the inner working of cults and the methods used to indoctrinate followers. However, the scenes that follow provide a mere glimpse into the process, leaving many questions unanswered.

Some readers will be disappointed in the lack of action, but the book might hit the right spot for those who are more meditative. *When Mermaids Sing* strives to be an introspective story and attempts to show the different path individuals take to find their niche in the world. With Larry it's about maintaining the status quo—a respectable job, a nice apartment and a girlfriend—while Bradley is more open to exploring other avenues to find his nirvana.

The novel seems to want to be more than a story about cults, with more focus on the relationships between characters and their conversations than the actual subject matter. Ultimately, *When Mermaids Sing* would be a better book if Zvonkovic expanded the storyline to include more about life within The Path and less of Larry's ruminations about Millie and his past.

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