



When We Were All Still Alive: A Novel

Keith McWalter

SparkPress

Softcover \$16.95 (272pp)

978-1-68463-077-6

In the domestic novel When We Were All Still Alive, a couple handles everyday surprises and disappointments, learning together how to love and be loved.

In Keith McWalter's novel *When We Were All Still Alive*, an aging, contemplative man battles his instincts toward isolation.

Connie and Sarah are each other's second spouses. Theirs is a stable and loving relationship through which they navigate past regrets, transforming their relationships with family, friends, and exes together. But a car accident changes this forever.

Facing life without love, Connie recalls his past: his first marriage, the birth of his daughter, meeting Sarah, and all the intricacies of their lives. He also decides how to face his future. With the help of his daughter and the close friends he's made over time, Connie learns that he is not as alone as he feels.

Connie is a levelheaded, hardworking man whose profound poetic thoughts make the narrative expressive. Other characters come to life through his perspective. He is observant and reflective, processing the actions and motivations of himself and others, resulting in connections and empathy for everyone.

New York is featured in the text, with its busy pace and signature landmarks reflected in Connie's careful, illustrative descriptions. Connie struggles with a sense of uselessness as he ages and works less, touching on the dynamic between productivity and self-worth. But while his world is full of strong women, his internal voice often betrays some sexism. His depictions of women often revolve around their attractiveness, their efforts at maintaining beauty, their sexual availability, and whether they are aging well. Connie's relationship with Sarah is deeper; their conversations are open and forgiving.

Sarah is good-hearted. She cares for her friends, treats Connie's daughter as her own, and volunteers in a soup kitchen. She struggles with alcoholism, which manifests in an insidious, casual way. Her perspective contributes to the narration, and reflects the uncomfortable intimacy of the couple's close friendships; her innocent but provocative crush on another man results in soft tension.

Sarah's women friends, who are often the wives of the couples they are friends with, discuss motherhood and childlessness, sacrificing their careers for their families, the expectations placed on them, and the ailments of aging. Sarah is often the bridge for Connie in terms of his social relationships; without her, he has to learn to accept friendship for himself.

The story starts with the knowledge that Sarah dies in a car accident; this, combined with Connie's often melancholy musings, results in underlying sadness throughout the book. Much of the novel is dedicated to viewing the couple's everyday life. It covers a long time span, and the plot is often lost in the minutiae. As the story winds back to Sarah's accident, it switches gears to focus on the present, showing how Connie deals with his grief. In many ways: the book's

second half is disconnected from the rest of the story, though its characters and concepts contribute to an optimistic ending.

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DELIA STANLEY (March 11, 2021)

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