

Where She Belongs

Kaitlin Cooke

FriesenPress

(152pp)

978-1-5255-5578-7

Childhood sweethearts navigate the challenges of adulthood in Where She Belongs, a sweet small-town romance.

At the center of Kaitlin Cooke's sweet contemporary romance *Where She Belongs* are two people who have never fallen out of love.

After her father's death, Amelia wants comfort. She returns to her hometown and falls into the arms of the one person who's always felt like home to her: her first love, Dawson. Soon, it's like she never left, but Amelia knows she'll eventually have to reconcile her romance with her big city life.

Dawson's heart broke the first time Amelia moved away, and he's not looking to repeat the experience. But their separation is inevitable: he's rooted by his family ranch and is a cowboy down to his bones, whereas Amelia is a professional ballerina whose successful career keeps her in New York. Dawson's passion for bull riding doesn't help; after losing her mother to a horse-riding accident, Amelia is not keen on losing the man she loves in a similar way.

Both characters are crafted with care. Their careers, relationships, friendships, devotion to family, and hobbies are all detailed. The story alternates between their points of view, allowing unrestricted access to their minds, though Dawson has less room than Amelia: the second half of the book is focused on her, and the impact of later events on him is not as explored.

Delving into their relationship from the beginning, the book handles Amelia and Dawson's past in an expositional manner. Their high school relationship is said to have been special, but there are no flashbacks and few anecdotes to shed light on the period. In the present, they fall back into their comfortable dynamic almost immediately, in part because neither seems to have changed much in more than superficial ways.

Two different conflicts stand between Amelia and Dawson, but the question of location dominates, if it's underexplored in the first half of the book. Both claim to be aware of their imminent separation, but Dawson isn't altogether convinced that Amelia will leave. When the prospect of their separation is tackled full-on, it proves to be emotional and satisfying. The characters grow—Dawson most—in a way that's encouraged. Whether either will have to sacrifice their dreams or personality for the sake of love is unclear; both remain individuals, whether they're together or apart. The abrupt resolution is absent a real sense of how Amelia and Dawson are going to function as a couple, though.

Where She Belongs is a enjoyable small-town romance with childhood sweethearts navigating adulthood at its core.

CAROLINA CIUCCI (October 31, 2019)

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