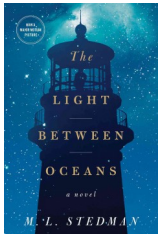


Light between Oceans : a novel

Light between Oceans



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When we lived in Alaska, every summer we rode the Alaska state ferries past some islands-- rocky, bird-filled--that had only one sign of civilization, the bright revolving lighthouse. Each time I wondered about this way of life that had almost faded. This wonderful novel fleshes out what life was like for a family in the 1920s off the east coast of Australia.

If you ever wondered about this vocation, Stedman captures the isolation and the magic of being far from the crowd, the joy certain light house workers found in a solitary working environment where the people you served--the sailors and merchant shipmen--relied totally upon you even though you would never meet.

The Light between Oceans begins with young Tom Sherbourne riding a boat to Partageuse on the east coast of Australia after having recently been discharged from the military. He'd won some medals in WWI and was now assigned to be a temporary lighthouse keeper on Janus Rock. While in town getting his papers processed, he meets Isabel, a girl of nineteen, who invites him to feed bread to the ducks at the dock. When he thanks her later, she says, it's just a silly thing, but he replies that he enjoyed it very much. Tom is scarred by the violence of the war and by his family life before when his mother abandoned him and his father and brother. In fact, Tom refuses to speak to his dad over what happened.

Isabel and Tom meet again at a dinner party and when he's living on the rock, she writes to him. His six-month gig turns into a nearly four year one. On Janus Rock, he and Isabel start a family. The family is the complicated part of the story. Let's just say that like any island there is lots of jetsam that lands on the beach.

Some of the most vivid scenes are these of Tom taking care of the light and the family living on the island, naming the coves and beaches whatever they like. A lighthouse keeper learns to be self-sufficient, growing his own food, fixing things when they break, and handling first aid and emergencies including childbirth. Most importantly, he keeps detailed reports about everything. These are legal logs that cannot be tampered with or changed.

Stedman vividly captures the area: Janus Rock sits on the coast between two seas: the Indian and the Pacific. She also really nails the time period in a small remote town in Australia. And amazingly, for a first novelist, she slips between many voices: a young girl with confusing parentage, two sailors Bluey and Ralph who ferry supplies to the island, the head of police for the town, Vernon Knuckey, who occasionally bends the rules, Isabel's parents, and Hannah Roennfeldt, who has mysteriously lost her husband after an anti-German riot.

The novel is about opening yourself up to the world even after fate has treated you badly. It's about the redeeming quality of love, both between couples and between parents and children. It's also about how a single lie can be ruinous. A really good read, it does what the best literature does--transports you to another world, and allows you to experience the dailyness of

another place and the varied people who call it home.

Another novel about a lighthouse keeper's family that is set off the coast of Tasmania is

The Lightkeeper's Wife.

Posted by Dory L. on May 8, 2013

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