

TRIPPING ON THE TWELVE STEPS

a review by
Sharon E. Colley

Karen Tucker. *Bewilderness*:
A Novel. Catapult Books,
2021.

SHARON E. COLLEY is Professor of English at Middle Georgia State University. Her BA degrees in English and Communications are from Mercer University. She earned an MA in English from the University of Tennessee Knoxville and a PhD from Louisiana State University. She reviews regularly for *NCLR* and in 2021 published an essay on Lee Smith in *NCLR*.

KAREN TUCKER was born and raised in North Carolina and now teaches fiction and creative nonfiction at UNC Chapel Hill. *Bewilderness*, her debut novel, was longlisted for the Aspen Words Literary Prize, shortlisted for the Crook's Corner Book Prize, and selected as a "Dazzling Debut" and Indie Next Pick by the American Booksellers Association. Her fiction can be found in *Missouri Review*, *Yale Review*, *LitHub*, *Boulevard*, *EPOCH*, *Tin House*, *American Literary Review*, and elsewhere.

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Bewilderness is an engaging novel: the story is intriguing, the characters are well-drawn (if not always likable), and the pacing is energetic without rushing. With a plot that could easily become overly dramatic or formulaic, author Karen Tucker instead provides an original narrative with consistent but plausible surprises.

The bulk of the novel occurs in fading North Carolina towns, where industries have left, followed by much of the population. What remains of human dwellings are often rough and bedraggled. Opportunities and hope are in short supply, though some characters do genuinely care for each other. *Bewilderness* has some characteristics of Grit Lit, especially given the difficult economic and familial situations. The locales in bars, run-down rental properties, and places to procure drugs read as dirty, dangerous, and unpleasant. Yet the characters struggle to find escape and agency. The story is more interested in their evolving psychology than in their sociological status.

The high quality of the writing is especially fortunate given the subject matter. *Bewilderness* tells the story of close friends Irene and Luce, two young women who embrace drug use

and then, at times, try to get clean. The text provides enough details for people with no experience with drug culture (like myself) to get a clear picture of the girls' life with addiction. In fact, the specifics of how Irene and Luce procure and use pharmaceuticals are vivid enough that I wondered if it might be triggering for those in recovery.

The girls' experimentation with and reliance on alcohol, illegally obtained prescription pills, and heroin provides a major plot focus. Irene and Luce make many attempts to get clean, some more serious than others, often utilizing a twelve-step program and meetings. Financing for their drug use comes from a variety of sources, including legitimate employment, cons, and increasingly dangerous and illegal activities. Their addiction costs them not only opportunities, but their safety, health, and people they care about. The author conveys the danger and tragedy that accompanies addiction, while also indicating what makes the characters give up everything for the high. The monster of addiction shows its face.

Arguably, though, addiction is not the heart of the story; the complicated relationship

between Irene and Luce forms its centerpiece. Neither young woman has significant family support. Luce's mother has stolen money from her, for example. When the girls first meet at the rough bar where they waitress, Irene is drawn into Luce's exciting world of danger and daring; the drugs are only part of the appeal. The relationship, at least from Irene's point of view, seems codependent; hanging with Luce in their shared apartment becomes all Irene really wants in life:

I pictured the two of us somewhere up ahead in our future, sitting at our kitchen table, maybe eating cake with our fingers and drinking huge mugs of hot sugary coffee and laughing about all the stuff we'd gone through since with first met each other. Not just the guys, but also the string of restaurant jobs, the side hustles, all the trouble we'd managed to kick up before we got clean. (8)

Irene's desire to stay connected to Luce supersedes any other relationships or even her – and Luce's – best interests. Their mutual devotion to their friendship, however, does not keep the girls from stealing from each other, lying, or even sabotaging each other's attempts at sobriety. Irene becomes threatened

when Luce's boyfriend wants to move her to Florida to get clean, leaving Irene behind. He is not the only character who suggests that perhaps the friends separate; Irene's boyfriend opines that "you're never going to get clean as long as she's using" (234). In both cases, Irene prioritizes the girls' relationship over everything else. In a particularly troubling incident, when she has almost a year clean and Luce has a setback, Irene intentionally starts using so they can be together. Irene is, of course, wrong that returning to drugs rather than losing Luce is "wholesome," and her continued inability to see that is part of her tragedy. As readers, we feel the passionate attachment of Irene to the central friend in her life, even as we see they are not always good to or for each other.

A dark book in many ways, *Bewilderness* is a story not bereft of hope. The text enriches Southern and specifically North Carolina literature by providing believable stories of characters not often given center stage. While not for the faint-hearted or easily susceptible, *Bewilderness* is a rewarding story of heartbreak, addiction, mourning, and hope. ■

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ABOVE Karen Tucker in a virtual novel release reading hosted by Malaprop's Bookstore, 9 June 2021