

BETWEEN LIFE BEFORE AND LIFE AFTER

a review by Kristi Southern

Heather Frese. *The Saddest Girl on the Beach*. Blair Publishing, 2024.

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HEATHER FRESE'S debut novel, *The Baddest Girl on the Planet* (2021; reviewed in NCLR Online Fall 2022), won the Lee Smith Novel Prize, was longlisted for The Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize, and was named one of the Women's National Book Association's Great Group Reads of 2021. She received an MA from Ohio University and an MFA in fiction from West Virginia University. A freelance writer, Heather worked with Outer Banks publications as well as publishing short fiction, essays, poetry, and interviews in various literary journals, including *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the *Los Angeles Review*, *Front Porch*, the *Barely South Review*, and *Switchback*.

Heather Frese's second novel, *The Saddest Girl on the Beach*, follows nineteen-year-old Charlotte as she navigates her new life after the recent death of her father from cancer. Readers will recognize Charlotte from Frese's first novel, *The Baddest Girl on the Planet*. In the latest story involving Charlotte and Evie, which takes place before the events in the earlier novel, Charlotte is our protagonist and narrator, and we accompany her as she spends a year on North Carolina's Outer Banks barrier islands. Charlotte finds herself in a number of opposing places throughout her year on the Outer Banks, physically between the solid mainland and the vast, ever-changing ocean, on the cusp of adulthood, between life and death, and between her before self and her after self, as she searches for equilibrium and her place in life without her father.

What has always been a family vacation locale for Charlotte growing up is now her temporary home as her story begins in January, on a "bruised" day (3), both windy and unseasonably warm, on the island to where she has admittedly run away from home. She is staying at the inn operated by her friend Evie's family, whom she grew up visiting every summer. As she begins helping out and eventually working at the inn over her time there, we see several references to the difference between life as a summer tourist and life as one who is BOI (Born on Island), one of many instances when Charlotte finds herself straddling her *place* in life. She knows she is abandoning the responsibility of school as



COURTESY OF HEATHER FRESE

well as her mother and brother in Ohio, but the familiarity of the Outer Banks and its placement as an in-between is what she feels she needs to move forward. As her months there progress, she begins to feel less like an outsider and more like a local, realizing this stark contrast when her family comes to visit the island, "unfurling [her] into who [she] was *before*" (172). During the novel's final storm, at the grocery store with locals who are not leaving as the tourists do, Charlotte feels that she will "never feel anonymous here again," as "all of [her] was here, before and after" (249). Whether she has found her place yet or not, Charlotte will always have a home here. Not only have her own father's ashes been released into the Atlantic, but Evie's father directly tells her, "you got a place here, kiddo" (104).

The loss of her father may have driven Charlotte to escape to the North Carolina coast, but new life parallels that absence. We learn early in the novel that Evie is expecting a child with her boyfriend Stephen, a fellow islander whom she has grown up with and believes does not meet the approval of her parents. Her mother fears "she'll never finish school and get off the island now" (15), which is in contrast to Charlotte who has chosen to *leave* school to escape to the island. Via Evie, Charlotte finds herself literally between life and death – the death of her father and the new life Evie is carrying. Charlotte must watch Evie as she decides between an education that can offer new experiences and a different life or a married life on the island, raising a child with a

boy she may or may not really love. While Charlotte, the summer tourist, and Evie, the local, have grown up quite differently, their friendship is a strong bond that prevents them from having to maneuver their struggles independently, and as a reader, I was comforted to know that "Sometimes, around Evie, [Charlotte] forgot to be sad, just for a moment" (77).

Nate, Evie's brother, and Michael, the boyfriend of Charlotte's cousin Troia, are two other forces Charlotte finds herself between. After her father's death Charlotte narrates that she has lost feeling, but she finds herself feeling intensely when in the presence of both boys – and both of them reciprocate. Nate is a solid, sturdy anchor who is thinking of a future with Charlotte; a relationship with him should be easy. Michael is already in a relationship with someone Charlotte loves, and his future is one of traveling as he finishes his studies (in science, like Charlotte's



ABOVE AND RIGHT Heather Frese on the Outer Banks of North Carolina

father). Like the ocean, "Michael is currents and motion and life" (218). A relationship with him is not the easy path, but Charlotte is learning during her stay that not all life decisions and paths are the easy ones. Nate and Michael are not the only characters affected by Charlotte's choice, though, as Charlotte knows that choosing Michael over Nate will result in fall out with both Evie, protective or her older brother, and Troia, undecided where her future lies with Michael, but obviously not receptive to turning him over to Charlotte. While Charlotte finds herself in a bit of a summer love triangle, it at least serves as a distraction from grief and a return to feeling.

Charlotte deals with her emotional numbness after her father's death with instances of cutting, which Frese handles delicately and somewhat vaguely. The novel begins with Charlotte's hand bleeding; she has accidentally scraped herself on the dock. A second instance occurs when Charlotte is helping Evie's mother in the kitchen, peeling carrots for carrot cake with "escalating intensity until [she] scored across the side of [her] thumb" and her "blood pulsed, alive in [her] body" (22). Later, when she presses on the cut, she notes that the pain doesn't make her "feel alive like it had yesterday" (66). Thinking of her father's last rainstorm

while in church with Evie's family, Charlotte gives herself a paper cut with the program; this time, the cut seems to be more of an intentional response to her conflicted feelings about death and spirituality. Again, on Evie's wedding day, Charlotte becomes emotional watching Evie with her father, and she responds by picking up scissors and "For the first time in months, [she] placed a sharp silver blade to [her] skin" (113). She later admits that she has done this in the past because she couldn't feel anything otherwise. Charlotte acts out a rather serious response to grief that Frese touches on in a subtle way and does not return to once Charlotte's father's ashes are released into the ocean.

It seems an injustice to leave out the Atlantic Ocean and the Outer Banks themselves in any discussion of Frese's novel, as they serve as a lively and adaptive setting and tool. As Evie's mother notes, "There is no 'usual' when it comes to Hatteras weather," to which Charlotte responds, "Life on a sandbar" (95). Its mercurial weather and geography both complement and contrast Charlotte's feelings and moods over the course of her year there. Frese uses descriptions from *How to Read a North Carolina Beach: Bubble Holes, Barking Sand, and Rippled Runnels* throughout via text conversa-

tions between Charlotte and Michael.* The first excerpt from the book is about swash zones, which Charlotte compares to herself: "*I'm the swash zone, [she] wrote. A shallow layer of grief constantly moving back and forth*" (71). Later, Michael seems to compare Charlotte to their environment again when he texts her the reminder from Orrin H. Pilkey's book that "*Although delicate and even fragile in appearance when viewed from the air, barrier islands are actually both durable and flexible*" (134). Near the end of Charlotte's year on the island, as a coastal storm is approaching and she is determining what her future holds, we are reminded that "Barrier islands are meant to move"; they do not "stay in one place, like people sometimes want to do" (255).

Frese's novel is a fitting beach read, with characters who are sometimes sarcastic, funny, and thoughtful, but almost always quite likeable. Any Eastern North Carolinian will recognize references such as the wild ponies, Queen Anne's Revenge, thick brogue, and Bonner Bridge. Those readers who have found themselves in between life before and life after grief are rooting for Charlotte to find her *equilibrium* and "figure out how to stand alone on the shifting sand" (269), to find her places in her new life. ■

* Orrin H. Pilkey, *How to Read a North Carolina Beach: Bubble Holes, Barking Sand, and Rippled Runnels* (U of North Carolina P, 2004).