

A Balm in Gilead: A Novel

Marie Green McKeon

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A rape and a search for justice lead a young woman on a road toward overcoming fear in this complex story.

A Balm in Gilead tells the story of a young woman's rape and the ongoing danger she faces from her attacker. Marie Green McKeon skillfully builds suspense as her protagonist struggles to overcome paralyzing fear and reclaim her life.

The book begins as Quinn Carlisle recalls the night she returned alone to her college campus after her grandmother's funeral. An insecure nineteen-year-old, she encounters a young man who drags her to his dormitory room. The plot moves forward a decade to Quinn working, living alone, and learning to trust a sympathetic and aptly named neighbor, Joe Armstrong. In periodic flashbacks, she describes the attack and her futile efforts to recover. The perpetrator is identified as Dennis Price and a jury convicts him, but the judge, for some inexplicit reason, suspends Price's sentence. Point of view alternates between Quinn's narrative and the close third-person perspective of other pivotal characters. A subplot involving Billy O'Brien, a man whose life was similarly ruined by the corrupt judge who presided at Dennis's trial, adds interest.

McKeon excels at portraying Quinn's conflicted behavior. At Dennis's trial, his defense attorney accuses Quinn of lying. When she is reduced to tears, Quinn's father berates her for crying in the courtroom. She realizes no one else understands the true reason she cries: "I was grieving over the realization that, barely ten minutes into the proceedings, the real person on trial was me."

A color image of a monarch butterfly graces the book's cover, and smaller black-and-white renderings appear on the title page and within the text. The butterflies' annual migration symbolizes the perseverance required of Quinn and Joe to prove their suspicions about Dennis. As they drive from Maryland to Ohio to research Dennis's family background, a swarm of monarchs flies across the road. The sight lifts Quinn's spirits as she realizes that just as the butterflies "have purpose" in flying to Mexico, she has purpose, too.

The state police show little interest in Quinn's case, so Joe suggests she take self-defense training to protect herself. At first she reacts with denial, saying she wants to forget all about Dennis and his threats. But Quinn displays a growing self-assurance in this scene by accepting the truth of Joe's logic. "I had to face the fact that there was no putting this genie back in the bottle," she realizes.

Although it contains some typographical errors, the book's complex structure—with plot moving back and forth in time and changes of character perspective—works well. Clues suggesting Dennis's involvement in other crimes, cynical and dishonest authority figures, and Quinn's hesitant nature successfully hold attention. Characters are realistically drawn, notably Dennis and his cousin Ruth, who reveal the psychological damage done by an insulated and highly dysfunctional family. Even though Billy O'Brien and Quinn never meet, the device of their friendship shows the strength that mutual support can provide.

A Balm in Gilead offers an intriguing story centered on the distress rape victims endure when college authorities, law

enforcement, and family members fail to believe and support them.

MARGARET CULLISON (September 4, 2014)

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