

A Mercy of Widows

Marcy Lane

Happy Toad Books

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A Mercy of Widows is a moving and nuanced novel about grief and forgiveness.

In Marcy Lane's novel *A Mercy of Widows*, a Calgary woman acts as a caregiver for her sweetheart and, after his death, grapples with grief, guilt, and self-preservation.

Heddie suspended her dog training business to move in with her “ampersand” Hug after his terminal cancer diagnosis. He intended to give her his house and dog, Fella, but died before he could change his will. Three months later, Heddie returns from walking Fella and finds the locks changed, Hug's brother Stanley in the house, and her belongings on the curb. She babysits for her friend Leah, a death doula, in return for lodging. But then Heddie becomes a juror in a murder case involving two advocates of assisted death: Molly is accused of killing her husband, who was dying of cancer. Protesters pack the streets and the courtroom. Stanley, a bailiff, disparages Heddie's relationship with Hug. And Leah and Dee, Hug's lawyer, set up mediation.

Heddie is a vehicle through which the book addresses Canada's law on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID), enacted in 2016 and amended since. Opinions about MAID and pertinent legal processes scaffold the plot, and more than half of the book takes place in the courtroom or jury room. Some related work is too didactic: a full page of text is devoted to describing the courtroom setting, including Heddie's perceptions of the importance of judge, jury, lawyers, and others according to their seating design and placement. More humanizing are Heddie's trial notes, which include doodles and sketches. Further, in the course of her courtroom observations, Heddie is prone to emphasizing people's personalities and relationships more than legal procedures. She notes that a defense attorney wears cowboy boots “too floral for the insecure” at a price “too steep for the uncommitted,” while her impressions of her fellow jurors' characteristics change as she spends more time with them.

The book's characterizations are balanced, reflecting both positives and negatives. People exhibit flashes of anger and irritation but also compassion. Even Stanley, who seems so hard-hearted at the start of the novel, grows. Heddie, too, evolves over the course of the book, at first thinking that if she'd married Hug she and everyone else would acknowledge her right to grieve. Through hearing the court case, participating in mediation, and experiencing Leah's support, her feelings of guilt are given space to be acknowledged and resolved.

In addition to its interrogations of personal control and ethics, the novel highlights family dysfunction well. Heddie's sense of humor helps to temper the seriousness of this subject and others, cushioning the book's prompts toward deeper thought in entertainment. Switches between points of view undermine these considerations a bit: in the case of Dee, Hug's attorney, the perspective shifts to make room for clues about his will and intention. Heddie otherwise narrates, and her wry voice makes the intensity of past and present events more palatable. Still, the book's opening is so heavy on her humor that it gives the false impression that the novel is an irreverent look at death. The tone shifts after Heddie dresses for jury selection and Fella saves a puppy, becoming serious about addressing its controversial contemporary topic. And descriptions of the protests, occasional Substack entries, and social media posts result in added realism.

The humane novel *A Mercy of Widows* is about variations of support for and opposition to assisted dying.

LYNNE JENSEN LAMPE (June 7, 2024)

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