



## A Wonderful Place to Die

**MJ Biggs**

Night Owl Fiction

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*A Wonderful Place to Die is an insightful novel that centers on the victims and survivors of addiction.*

In MJ Biggs's novel *A Wonderful Place to Die*, a Ohio girl comes of age amid the opioid epidemic.

Dani is an Italian teenager living in a Cleveland neighborhood. At restaurants, in her home, and at Catholic school, she is supported by her large family; at school, she makes like-minded friends who form a punk band and who reflect her feminist ideals. Then, at a show, she meets Desmond, who grew up impoverished with a violent dad who was in and out of prison. They date through high school.

As Dani enters college, Desmond continues his recording work alongside a construction job. He takes Oxycontin and marijuana to alleviate his pain, and he becomes jealous of Dani's college friends. He spews angry threats and accusations and becomes violent. Dani discusses these episodes with her friends and family before her relationship comes to a head, when Dani's grandfather dies and she's forced to choose between Desmond's demanding love and her family's traditional values.

Moments of illumination and reflection come amid ordinary days in the novel. Between them, Dani hits developmental landmarks with sex, marriage, and her career. She is a strident lead who asks questions always, on and off the stage. Her grandparents, with whom she works and spends many weekends, temper her budding rebellion with care and humor. Her searching is threatened, though, by Desmond's volatile personality. Her life swings between comforting and combative extremes, but her thoughtfulness enables the book to maintain a balanced tone and a regulated pace.

Dani and Desmond's youth also makes this a novel about feelings and discovery. Dani's developing opinions about abortion, God, and Catholicism lead to enlightening conversations; they also help her to become a woman who's in command of her future, who makes sense of her experiences well, and who is able to move forward with confidence and grace.

Beyond Dani, a sense of Cleveland under siege develops. Once a thriving town, its citizens now confront widespread addiction. Desmond's mood swings, eating disorder, and family life are microcosms of this troubled landscape, while the city's country getaways, underground venues, and homes are a fertile background for Dani's tenacious, open-minded development. The stories of other women who grapple with their abusive, addicted partners and unplanned pregnancies arise, and are treated in a generous, accessible manner.

*A Wonderful Place to Die* is an insightful novel that centers on the victims and survivors of addiction.

MARI CARLSON (October 5, 2021)

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