



Sailing for Grace

Joseph Bauer

Running Wild

(410pp)

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Timely and with high emotional stakes, the heartwarming novel Sailing for Grace is about self-discovery, sacrifice, and standing up for what you know is right.

A grieving widower finds new purpose and perspective in Joseph Bauer's novel *Sailing for Grace*.

On her deathbed, Will's wife, Grace—always compassionate and more politically active than he—extracts an impossible promise from him: that Will will help immigrant children torn from their parents on the US-Mexico border. Despite his lack of knowledge and interest in such a mission, Will sets out on a fact-finding investigation to learn what is really going on. When he discovers the extent of the suffering on the border, his simple quest turns into a daring plan to reunite some of the separated families. To do so, however, he has to defy his own government, putting himself and the people he cares about at great personal and legal risk.

Will travels from Rhode Island to Texas and beyond. His risky scenario lends itself to difficult emotional experiences and tense exchanges as he and his allies put their scheme into action. Their conversations, though, shift between unnatural exposition and comfortable camaraderie. Intermittent descriptions offer snapshots of intriguing characterizations, in particular of a sharp-tongued nun who helps Will in his quest. However, compared with the white characters, the refugees are underdeveloped, present most to give Will a way to keep his promise to Grace. Minimal attention is devoted to anything beyond Will's personal development; in the process, the story becomes a white savior narrative.

At times, the book goes too far in showing sympathy for both sides, even describing a Border Patrol agent who separates children from their parents as “an angel” who “protects the children” while justifying his and others' actions as a matter of following orders. To support this assertion, the story glosses over the full extent of the horrors undocumented immigrants face, including abuse perpetrated by border agents. Elsewhere, the assumption that Hondurans have an automatic affinity for tequila, a Mexican drink, is jarring.

Some plot points are underexplained, including why Will feels the need to travel to the border so early in his investigation when he has access to resources, including a New York contact, closer to home. And the long-term consequences of Will's actions are in some ways unclear: The Honduran families receive closure, but whether Will now intends to return to his old life or feels inspired to make a permanent change in his behavior remains a mystery.

Sailing for Grace is a novel about the vast, dangerous gulf between legality and morality.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 18, 2024)

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