



The Half-Life of Guilt

Lynn Stegner

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In Lynn Stegner's novel *The Half-Life of Guilt*, a couple's personal and professional relationship is tested as they protest the endangerment of a whale population.

Clair is a biologist and botanist who grew up on her family's Napa Valley vineyard. Her British-born lover, Mason, is an environmental photojournalist. Clair is self-contained yet yearning, while Mason is forthright; both are affected by family traumas.

The story shifts from Clair's present perceptions to her early years, covering her troubled bond with her twin sister, Nina. Clair's expressive interior thoughts reveal her feelings of anxiety and social detachment; she is also sometimes frustrated by her career and weary "of having a mission and not a life."

Upon discovering that a global saltworks corporation is planning an expansion that will impact the California gray whale, Clair and Mason venture to the saltworks' headquarters in Mexico, hoping to meet with the corporate executives. As they travel, though, they meet with bureaucratic and geographical difficulties and face tensions in their relationship. Their intimacy is strained and strengthened by the changing terrain and their shared displacement.

There are captivating descriptions of Mexican markets, filled with "ceramics, bright clothing, mangoes and figs and dates," but also of the impoverished landscape and the trash-choked tides of Isla Cedros. Gray whales frolic in the lagunas with wondrous "immensity," while beyond their breeding ground looms the coveted natural abundance of sea salt. At the saltworks, ecological efforts conflict with economic realities, as the massive plant provides generational employment to the local residents. As outsiders, Clair and Mason meet with cultural resistance and an entrenched, even perilous undertow of overreach and corruption.

The Half-Life of Guilt is an intricate and encompassing novel about the human complexities behind conservation work.

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