

The Lines

Anthony Varallo

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In Anthony Varallo's evocative and taut *The Lines*, the end of a marriage brings about an unsettling beginning for a family. Set during the 1970s and amid oil and gasoline shortages, the US's scarcity of fuel and the public's outrage over rationing create additional elements of tension, frustration, and occasional violence.

The novel's perspective shifts between its four primary characters, known simply as the boy, the girl, the father, and the mother. The eight-year-old boy is often naïve, while his sister alternates between preadolescent cynicism and vulnerability. All of the family members are resonant, but the children are most appealing: perceptive, flawed, and familiar.

Interesting variations in the children's lives—like spending weekends at their father's new apartment—are offset by the divorce's darker elements, including their mother's flashes of bitter irritability and their father's moodiness. The parents return to the singles scene, asking out vivacious waitresses and agreeing to blind dates. When these relationships also fail, the children's furthered senses of confusion, mistrust, and betrayal are well-defined.

The time period of the American bicentennial is captured through patriotic expectations that contrast with the angry haze of exhaust fumes at the gas pump. Gumma, the children's crafty, dauntless grandmother, drinks margaritas while cruising around suburban Florida in her golf cart. Marcus, the arrogant teenage son of the mother's new boyfriend, warns the children about the socialist plots of the Boy Scouts and how Mayor McCheese is a McDonald's corporate shill. Meanwhile, President Jimmy Carter, with "the teeth" and "the peanuts," offers uncertain televised dispatches to a "nation on empty."

Subtle and melancholy, *The Lines* is a story about family dynamics, the ripple effects of separation, and the poignant and curious elements of an era.

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