



★ **The Polite Act of Drowning**

Charleen Hurtubise

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In Charleen Hurtubise's novel *The Polite Act of Drowning*, a small-town accident reawakens past traumas, forcing a girl to reckon with the chaos of her dysfunctional family and come to terms with her evolving identity.

On a family beach day on Lake Michigan, sixteen-year-old Joanne witnesses a young woman's last moments before she is swept away by the current and drowns. The traumatic event sends ripples through Kettle Lake and reawakens old rumors about a past tragedy involving Joanne's mother. At home, Joanne notices her mother becoming more unstable, disappearing into the woods for hours at a time and slipping away from reality and her family.

When the neighbors drop by with their new foster children, Joanne is ecstatic to discover a new friend in reckless and alluring Lucinda. The two fast become close. Lucinda draws Joanne into a new world of rebellion, independence, and sexual exploration. As the summer drags on, their relationship grows tense, though. And as Joanne learns more about her family's secrets, she searches for a sense of safety and acceptance, her hope waning. These multifaceted pressures come to a head in the novel's thrilling climax, wherein Joanne confronts her mother's demons head-on.

Sensory and dynamic, the prose revels in the natural beauty and claustrophobic social dynamics of Kettle Lake, all narrated from Joanne's limited point-of-view: she observes the water as a "boundless plain of mercury rolling like wind through wheat" and how her neighbors are wasted in their limiting jobs and relationships. She also conveys the anxieties and thrills of early adolescence well.

Interweaving themes of trauma, identity formation, sexuality, and grief with delicacy, *The Polite Act of Drowning* is a coming-of-age tale that cuts to the heart of human experience.

BELLA MOSES (November / December 2024)

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