



The Untended: A Novel

Mattea Kramer

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In the moving novel The Untended, a community's grit, hardiness, and sense of unity become apparent, even as its citizens struggle with addiction.

In Mattea Kramer's multifaceted novel *The Untended*, small-town people survive through hard times.

Casch is a single mother of two. She works as a waitress in Greenfield and struggles to get by. She hopes to start nursing school soon. Topher is a recent veteran, back from overseas. He grows marijuana with two of his childhood friends to make money.

When Casch and Topher meet, their connection is instant. A new and exciting romance develops. However, when someone runs over Casch's foot, she's prescribed a pain medication that's in the process of being removed from the shelves. It's notorious for its addictive properties.

Moved along by a sense of creeping dread, the novel follows as Casch begins needing the medication more and more, and all that she cares about is put at risk. Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical company that made the drug is shown to be guileful. Revealing information is given about the company's practices and leadership.

Subtle themes of the hardships faced by the working class, where one injury or one missed paycheck can lead to desperate situations, run throughout. In spite of this, joy and love permeate the narrative too. Casch is strong, fierce, and stubborn. Her care for her children is evident in each interaction she has with them. At her opposite, Topher is kind but traumatized. Even as he processes his wartime experiences, he displays keen knowledge about nature and strives to do right by those he loves. The supportive secondary cast includes Gabi, a dear friend of Casch's who is blunt but kind; Connor, Topher's childhood friend; and other townspeople in the tight-knit community.

The narrative cycles between perspectives, including Casch as her endurance wanes under the drug; Topher, who begins worrying about Casch; and Russ, Casch's estranged stepfather, as he tries to comfort his friend Ronnie in the face of loss. As these points of view coalesce, distinct throughlines are established: Each person was abused by a system of power on a personal, communal, or national level.

The characters' arcs connect through rending themes of neglect, which is felt by the rest of the town as well: The old silver factory, once a hub for jobs and economic growth, now sits vacant, and a pharmaceutical company takes advantage of the vulnerable. Still, the community's grit, hardiness, and sense of unity are shown in personal and social interactions. From Gabi and Topher refusing to give up on Casch to Russ accompanying Ronnie to AA meetings and protests against the pharmaceutical company, Greenfield's citizens persevere, hoping to make a difference.

A harrowing novel, *The Untended* is about the strength of a troubled community.

NATALIE WOLLENZIEN (February 14, 2025)

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