

What the Living Do

Susan E. Wadds

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A novel of beauty and bracing nuance, What the Living Do follows a woman's reconciliation to the pains of her past in pursuit of a better future.

With precise language and bold themes, Susan E. Wadds's novel *What the Living Do* twines together the consequences and complications of birth and death.

Brett is a road maintenance worker and occasional poet who struggles to feel grounded. She spends her days burying roadkill, finding strange solace in the carcasses and the tender prayers that her Ojibwe coworker Mel speaks over them. In the rest of her life, she feels numb. She loves her dog and longtime boyfriend, Cole, but she also contends with childhood trauma and survivor's guilt. She dreams of ill-planned escapes and avoids Cole's questions about having children. When a cervical cancer diagnosis threatens her ability to have children, the walls she built between herself and her past begin to crumble.

The novel navigates tough topics, including childhood sexual assault and death, with bracing nuance. Brett is messy and contradictory, as are some of the closest people in her life. She struggles with intense, poisonous shame that pushes her to self-sabotage. Her reticence to engage with the world is a source of frustration and realism. There are occasions she fails to rise to, and her shortcomings are made plain. In more than one instance, the Indigenous stereotypes she projects onto Mel are shattered by simple realities: Mel is not full of omniscient supernatural wisdom; rather, he is a quiet man who listens when people talk.

Much of the action plays out in conversation, in tense, confrontational scenes where what is not said is often more important than what is. Placing Brett, who has staked her survival in avoiding what hurts, in this context results in productive tension. Clipped but beautiful prose furthers her characterization, and the elliptical quality of the language reflects her private nature well, as with rich turns of phrase like "He sings the dark like thick cream" that betray her poet's heart. Ojibwe terms are also peppered throughout, often spoken in prayers and to identify animals.

Though the ambiguous ending leaves Brett's future in question, what is clear is the reaffirmation of her will not only to live, but to heal. Brett searches for the answers to her grief in the roadkill that surrounds her, though the possibility of new life keeps her going. The generative force of fertility and the destructive power of cancer are corded around each other, shown to have been inseparable from the beginning.

The searing novel *What the Living Do* makes space for the imperfections of healing with grace and unflinching honesty.

LUKE SUTHERLAND (September 17, 2024)

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