



What We Leave Behind

Christine Gallagher Kearney

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Triumphant and affecting, the historical novel What We Leave Behind follows an immigrant as she faces polio and the distrust of others.

In Christine Gallagher Kearney's tender historical novel *What We Leave Behind*, a war bride follows her husband to the US and finds that her new country is not the land she imagined.

Against the backdrop of post-World War II devastation, Ursula, a young German secretary, meets Roger, a kind, earnest American soldier. Roger falls in love with Ursula and offers her a better life in Minnesota. Practical and strong willed, Ursula marries Roger and relocates to Minneapolis.

Life in the US isn't as rosy as Ursula had hoped, though. The couple's home and income are modest; she misses her family and experiences nagging guilt about leaving them behind. Her new mother-in-law's anti-German bigotry dogs her, even though Ursula and her family were never supporters or members of the Nazi Party.

Ursula labors to fit in and be a model wife, finding support in the company of other war brides. After she contracts polio, she spends months living at a rehabilitation hospital trying to regain her strength and the ability to walk. Upon her release, new trials await: Roger dies, and she takes in a boarder to pay the mortgage. An unexpected development leads her to an agonizing choice.

Excellent characterizations guide the novel. Ursula is a resilient heroine who persists through gargantuan travails. The narrative's focus on her dogged pursuit of dignity and independence as a polio survivor is refreshing and noteworthy. As she struggles to relearn skills she took for granted, Ursula realizes that "she had expected her legs to be there, reliable, unannounced."

The supporting characters are well developed, too. Of note is Ursula's roommate at the polio hospital, whose support helps her to confront her sadness and despair, even though jealousies arise between them. Their powerful friendship offers them both the strength to recover. Ursula's relationships with men prove to be more problematic: Roger, although he is patient and understanding, wears blinders about his mother's treatment of her, and the Argentinian man Ursula meets as a widow appears to be ideal until conflicts arise over their political views; he displays a lack of mettle when she needs him most.

In direct but beautiful prose, the novel builds its conflicts in an unhurried way. But its second part, which takes place in the unusual setting of the polio hospital, is by far its strongest. After Ursula makes a consequential decision at the end of the novel, the narrative drops off in an abrupt way, with no falling action.

Still, *What We Leave Behind* is a quiet, affecting historical novel in which a woman seeks an independent life in a new country.

PAULA MARTINAC (April 26, 2023)

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