



The Heaviness of Things That Float

Jennifer Manuel

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Jennifer Manuel skilfully depicts the lonely world of Bernadette, a woman who has spent the last forty years living alone on the periphery of a remote West Coast First Nations reserve, serving as a nurse for the community. This is a place where truth and myth are deeply intertwined and stories are “like organisms all their own, life upon life, the way moss grows around poplar trunks and barnacles atop crab shells, the way golden chanterelles spring from hemlock needles. They spread in the cove with the kelp and the eelgrass, and in the rainforest with the lichen, the cedars, the swordferns. They pelt down inside raindrops, erode thick slabs of driftwood, puddle the old logging road that these days led to nowhere.”

Only weeks from retirement, Bernadette finds herself unsettled, with no immediate family of her own—how does she fit into the world? Her fears are complicated by the role she has played within their community: a keeper of secrets in a place “too small for secrets.” And then a shocking announcement crackles over the VHF radio of the remote medical outpost: Chase Charlie, the young man that Bernadette loves like a son, is missing. The community is thrown into upheaval, and with the surface broken, raw dysfunction, pain and truths float to the light.

The Heaviness of Things That Float Details

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Author : Jennifer Manuel

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From Reader Review The Heaviness of Things That Float for online ebook

Elinor says

When you read a first novel like this one, you just think wow. Jennifer Manuel has a real gift for description, for characters, and for unveiling an interesting story one layer at a time. Being Canadian, I was naturally interested in her portrayal of our indigenous people, which was very well done. All her characters were genuine individuals, with a range of human talents and failings. The only thing I questioned, and not enough to reduce my five-star rating, was why Bernadette chose that life for herself. Her isolation and loneliness seemed almost unbearable. Hopefully when my book club discusses this it will become more clear to me.

Jen says

“The Heaviness of Things that Float,” is a beautiful, haunting story. We follow Bernadette, a nurse who has served a First Nations Community for 40 years, and experience the upheaval that occurs in her life following the disappearance of Chase Charlie, a young man she loved like a son. Jennifer Manuel brings a remote but mystical environment to life as she examines the changes – in beliefs, relationships, and views – that Bernadette experiences as the story progresses. Using language that is lyrical and powerful, Jennifer Manuel shows the growth that can occur following such an upheaval – growth within an individual, growth between people, and growth between cultures.

Penny (Literary Hoarders) says

3.5 stars really

The second from my #20BooksofSummer list! A very strong opening, and a strong and emotional ending, it was the middle that I had a few struggles with - repetitiveness? or maybe the same story spinning around, not moving forward? I did really enjoy, there were many beautiful and poignant moments inside. Heartfelt and perhaps a melancholic ending meant a very good ending to Bernadette's story. I'd recommend for those seeking good Canadian literature.

Virginia says

Read this in 24 hours. It's the type of book you will think about for a long time after you have put the book down. Loved it.

Portia says

This is a book that will stay with me..not one to forget soon. A story of people confronting tragedy and grief, in their own way and according to their own traditions. Beautifully written.

Lauren Davis says

Although this isn't a perfect book (what book is?), it's a book well worth reading. It's moving, and does a good job of exploring the fault-lines between cultures. The main character is complicated and difficult and, most importantly, interesting. Although at times the author doesn't seem to trust her ability to tell this story, and over-explains, where a lighter touch might have been more effective, for a first novel is far more accomplished than most.

The relationship between whites and Indigenous people is often fraught, and who gets to tell the story is debatable. Manuel bravely walks into the fray and, as someone who has lived in Indigenous communities for decades, she is more qualified than most white people. (I'm of mixed Indigenous/European heritage and I don't feel comfortable tackling it!) Here, her focus is on what blind spots non-Indigenous people have, how and why humans delude themselves. It's thought-provoking, and an important part of the conversation on reconciliation in Canada.

I hope people will read this book. I hope they will talk about how they respond to it.

Dsinglet says

This book moved me on so many levels. First, there is well crafted story about Bernadette a nurse, retiring after 40 yrs. at a remote outpost near a reserve. She has been friend, enemy, confidant and keeper of clan secrets through her medical records. She is about to return to a mainland life where there is no family or friends left to her. She will give up the people she has loved and adopted as family. A young nurse, Wren, arrives to replace her. Wren is beautifully drawn as a complex, caring nurse. We, the readers don't know whether to love or fear her and so the plot and tension build. Then there is the disappearance of Chase Charlie, a boy Bernadette partially raised and loves like a son. He goes missing. She tries to find him and unravel the mysteries round him, some Stories true, some complicated legends.

I realized as I mulled over this book that the author dealt with the issues of suicides and poor living conditions on the reserve in an organic way by writing it into her story. It made the loss and hurt so real. It opens the eyes much wider than just the statistics which we see all the time.

Sarah-Mae Adam says

Hauntingly beautiful.

While listening to CBC radio on my drive home along the south-west coast of Vancouver Island I caught the tail end of an interview with the author. The story of Bernadette, the setting on a north-west Vancouver island reserve and the issues surrounding privilege and First Nations rights intrigued me and I pulled over to jot down the title. I am so glad I did.

"It is the story of Bernadette—a woman not quite 65—who has spent the past 40 years working as a nurse in the fictional village of Tawakin, a remote First Nations community on the northwest coast of Vancouver

Island. When Chase Charlie, a young man whom Bernadette loves as a son, disappears, the entire community of Tawakin is affected. Ancient, long-buried stories bubble to the surface, as do old resentments, entrenched fears, dark secrets and not-quite-finished business.

Rich and layered, Manuel skillfully paints an evocative picture of the desolate, yet beautiful landscape that is Vancouver Island's wild, untamed coast. You can smell the cedar and smoke; you can hear the ravens in the trees; you can feel the icy sting of the relentless rain on your cheek. Most importantly, you can feel the quiet wisdom and aching vulnerability of the people who call Tawakin their home.

Jeff says

Simply put, this is one of the best books I've ever read. Perhaps it resonated more than it might have at some earlier stage in my life because I've lived on the west coast of Vancouver Island for nine years now, and I read the book on little San Rafael Island overlooking Yuquot on Nootka Island, where only one family remains. (It's certainly the first time I've seen the handful of words we use here - chumiss, klecko, chuu, kakawin, puui - in print.) I've flown over the island named Toomista in the book and wondered why those houses behind the sandy beach sat empty.

Jennifer Manuel does not set a foot wrong. We are quickly inside the mind and thoughts of Bernadette, her main character, our narrator. While there's no doubt that she's firmly entrenched as part of the community after 40 years in residence as the outpost nurse, prickles of doubt arise as to whether we can trust her interpretation of her place within the community. I cringed a little at her certainty that those four decades and the knowledge and intimacies involved in being their nurse made her part of this extended First Nations family. And sure enough, as her time on the Tawakin Reserve is coming to an end, self-doubt and confrontation forces her to question her real place amongst the people she has spent her adult life with. While dealing with this inner turmoil the young man she is closest to suddenly disappears, his fishing boat left in a protected anchorage. This mystery drives the book as Bernadette conducts her own searches, seeks out the man's mother, living apart from and estranged from the community, and continues to sift through her memories of the past looking for clues and explanations and understanding.

While we begin at the end of Bernadette's 40 years on Tawakin, the arc of her time there is revealed through her memories. Most are positive but there has been heartbreak, betrayal and tragedy as well. She has earned her position of trust, her friendships but, perhaps because of her proximity, she is blinkered, unable or unwilling to see that there are two solitudes and that she will always be part of the one not resident on the reserve. The two can overlap, embrace even, but they will not be one anytime soon.

This may be Bernie's flaw but it's an understandable one and she is a good person, a narrator you're happy to spend time with, and within, for almost 300 pages. And, as with any good mystery, we are free to question her perspective, to come up with our own theories, until all, or at least most, is revealed at the end.

The writing is so strong that *The Heaviness of Things That Float* has the best qualities of documentary, as if a skilled memoirist had written of her time in this place, to the point that Tawakin becomes real and you're tempted to get on the Uchuck, or the Pacific Sojourn, and visit and see if Patty and Hannah are doing better, if Nan Lily is still alive.. But, of course, 'they' are not there. This is fiction done so well that we think it's true, and it has the drama, the confrontations and tensions, the conflicts in need of resolution, that mark the best fiction.

And the characters: Bernie, at retirement, wondering whether this was a life well lived, Chase, the son she never had, Miranda, his mother, mad with grief or, possibly, just mad, Frank, Bernie's one-time love and, yes, Chase's father... yes, it's complicated, as they say. Deliciously so.

Let the rain, or, this winter, perhaps the snow, fall, let the fog roll in if it desires, let the clouds creep down the mountains, and reflect on the ocean's surface until all the world is grey with a smudge of green forest and

throw another log on the fire, a blanket on your knees, and spend your day with this book. That you will know more about our First Nations at the end of it is a bonus. That you will experience the emotional highs and lows, the pleasures, that only a good book can give you, is guaranteed.

C says

OMGosh! I just love this book! It is so beautifully, and descriptively written that you can "actually" see it playing out like a movie in your head. Being a Micmac Indian, I sort of had an affinity to this book after I read the back. Please read this book; it will open up your heart, mind, and spirit to start a conversation. You will not be disappointed!!

Fran says

The author's knowledge and experience of life on a First Nations reserve on the West Coast live in this book. It is the story of a poignant and painful realization of Bernadette, a nurse on the reserve, as she is about to retire after 40 years living in the community. The disappearance of Chase Charlie, the young man who Bernadette has loved as a son throws her and the community into upheaval. Particularly the last chapters as the story moves to the climax are gripping and immersive. This book is honest and beautiful and it hurts.

Magdelanye says

You have to turn in a circle many times to get the truth, picking up just a little each time, taking it in...digesting it p47

In such a circuitous fashion, JM weaves a story around the complications of displacement and belonging: the exclusive nature of community and the crucial role of tradition. Fearless in her excavations, based on her own experiences as a white service provider in a remote native community, she asks if it is possible to overcome the cultural divide and find true communion on the other side.

Note on rating... even though I had some issues with some of the events and personalities, and the sense of gloomy detachment, I bumped this up because I am still thinking about it

Maryan says

This is the story of a dedicated nurse who after 40 years of serving her nearby native community faces retirement with trepidation and regret. Tension builds and seams rip apart in the community when a man Bernadette has loved like a son goes missing. She grapples with her sense of belonging and her feelings of powerlessness as events unfold. The love she has for those she has served continue to fuel her even when she faces rejection. Native myth, culture and relationships are handled with respect and depth. Manuel's descriptions of scenery and personality keep the reader engaged right to the end. One of my best books of the year.

Vanessa Pillay says

Wow! A beautiful and moving book about a nurse who has worked in a very (very) remote indigenous community on Vancouver Island of 40 years. About family and belonging and culture and secrets. Amazing. Very powerful. Hard to believe it's a first novel!

Alexis says

A well-written story about being an outsider in a First Nations community. Bernadette is a nurse who has lived in a fictional First Nations community for 40 years. This book tells many stories of her time in the community, as the characters strive to grapple with a series of tragic events.

Manuel is a lyrical writer, and there is a great deal to be learned from this story.
