

Summer Island
Kristin Hannah, 2001
Crown, 319 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

If you judge a book by its cover, then read *Summer Island*! The picture of the perfect cottage is lovely. The Pacific Northwest setting of this heart-felt, smoothly-paced novel could easily have been in Maine. The story depicts the struggling relationship of a mother and daughter, and how this impacts the pursuit of happiness in their lives. The backdrop of sea breezes, water-lapping shorelines and apple tree-dotted fields holds the story like crockery contains hot soup. The author's voice has never been better in creating characters and mending souls that deal with heart ache and longing.

We face a story of a mother who left her husband and two children seemingly to pursue her own calling. *"We were a perfect family in a quiet little town where nothing ever happened. In all my growing-up years, I never heard my parents argue. Then, in the summer before my seventeenth birthday, everything changed. My mother left us,"* the youngest daughter writes in her journal as she rebuilds memories from her past. Above all else, *"it is longing, pure and simple,"* that Kristin Hannah writes about in her latest novel.

Nora Bridge is a woman concealing her estrangement from her family. In fact, she builds a cottage industry around her buried emotions, sprouting a national media career from a local newspaper advice column. Nora keeps her own stories a secret, while her daughters, Caroline and especially Ruby, are kept far from her heart. A decade covers the distance of time between them.

The author uses a deft touch, and more than a pinch of humor, in painting her full characters. Caroline, the oldest daughter has a carefully laid out life as a prosperous suburban mother and housewife. Like makeup, she chooses outward appearance as her mask of concealment.

Her younger sister is the angry, bitter rebel pushing any chance at happiness back into someone else's face. Ruby is the soul of *Summer Island*. She is the sharp-witted, defiant, fiery person every reader has known in their own lives. It is along her path that we are led, both in witnessing Ruby and following her journal, a literary device that I enjoyed in tracking her inner thoughts.

Ruby starts to deal with the uncomfortable truths that she's masked for ten years, as she writes in her journal, *"In forgetting my mother, how much have I forgotten about myself?"* It's a question, like many others, upon which readers might reflect. When Ruby allows herself a chance to see her mother differently, she writes, *"Today I talked to my mother. This is a remarkably ordinary sentence for a truly revolutionary act. I talked to her. She talked to me. By the end of it, we had both wept, although not, I'm sure, for the same reasons."* It still looks a lot like what Ruby depicts as, *"Laverne and Shirley on crack,"* but we begin to believe that there might be a hope of reconciliation between them.

Blended into the story are two brothers from a wealthy family, who own a cottage on another nearby island and grew up with the Bridge girls. Tension, denial and truth flow as Eric and Dean Sloan confront the conditional love of their own family, and as Eric begins his final dance with cancer. Each theme of these stories is powerful enough to be a separate book unto itself, which leads me to my only knock on the book. It seems overly melodramatic to have these parallel stories told together, yet I suspect that is what the author's loyal readers are expecting. The shared family experiences provide an ending that leaves the reader satisfied. As with other Kristin Hannah books, it's best to have tissues nearby.

Summer Island is a story that reveals the virtues of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption in dealing with families and life's mistakes. *"I'd always believed that the truth of a person was easily spotted, a line drawn in dark ink on white paper. Now, I wonder. Maybe the truth of who we are lies hidden in all those shades of gray that everyone talks about,"* offers Ruby. Each character gets a chance to show how individuals can control whether to get buried by the past, or release it by taking action allowing a second chance. Most of all, *Summer Island* is about the power of love, whether it's too strong, too needy, too scarce, or as the world's most potent ingredient in creating balance or peace in life. The author says *Summer Island* is her favorite of the three hardbacks and another six paperbacks she's published, largely due to bringing humor into her writing, alongside the imprint of losing her own mother to cancer.