



Red Hook Road

Ayelet Waldman

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A rich and rewarding story of love, loss, and the power of family from the bestselling author of *Bad Mother* and *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*.

In the aftermath of a devastating wedding day, two families, the Tetherlys and the Copakens, find their lives unraveled by unthinkable loss. Over the course of the next four summers in Red Hook, Maine, they struggle to bridge differences of class and background to honor the memory of the couple, Becca and John. As Waldman explores the unique and personal ways in which each character responds to the tragedy—from the budding romance between the two surviving children, Ruthie and Matt, to the struggling marriage between Iris, a high strung professor in New York, and her husband Daniel—she creates a powerful family portrait and a beautiful reminder of the joys of life.

Elegantly written and emotionally gripping, *Red Hook Road* affirms Waldman's place among today's most talented authors.

Red Hook Road Details

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From Reader Review Red Hook Road for online ebook

Jill says

It's never easy to write about tragic and premature death. Many writers have tried, and have lost their footing, stumbling on the thin obstacles of sentimentality and bathos. The result is a feeling of manipulation on the part of the reader. I'm pleased to state that Ayelet Waldman navigates this topic with confidence and sensitivity, elevating this book of families unraveling with considerable aplomb.

Instead of focusing on the tragedy itself, which many lesser writers might do, she asks important questions about how we survive when our world collapses: where do we find refuge or sanctuary? In music and the arts? Children? Hard work? Each other? How do we experience meaning again...and what do we do to seek redemption?

Red Hook Road takes place in Maine, on the eve of a wedding between two mismatched families: the New York Copakens who have adopted Maine as their own and the Tetherlys, a local family of far lesser stature. In the first several pages, the dynamics are set up: each of these families will equally suffer an unbearable loss. The book is divided into four sections, representing four separate Fourth of July weekends; the first, second, and third anniversary of the tragedy. We learn more about each of the characters -- the mothers and fathers, the sister and brother, the world-renown violinist grandfather, and the Cambodian adoptee, Samantha, who just happens to be a musical genius.

Each of these characters is so authentic that he or she could walk off these pages. Each, in his or her own way, is a survivor. One character, Ruthie, muses: "Maybe, now more than ever some kind of statement was required, a refusal to submit to loss, to let it work its mischief on them. And maybe it was that kind of stubbornness in the face of grief...that could, in the end, redeem them all."

There is much to learn in this book about the human condition: love, marriage, loss, and survival. Red Hook Road is lyrical, beautifully paced, and a testimony to how we evolve and grow...even in the worst of times.

K2 ----- says

I heard Waldman on the Diane Rehm Show and then read a review of the book in Booklist (the American Library Association's phenomenal magazine) and decided it was a novel of merit.

The book was written based in part on a short snippet of a story that the author had read about a couple in NY who had been killed going from their wedding to their wedding reception with the best man also in the car.

Waldman weaves quite a tale and is able to weave into each of her characters their own ways of dealing with the profound grief that results from this tragic loss. Red Hook Road takes place in Maine and draws its many contrasts upon class and traditions. The bride's family are Jewish and from NYC. They are highly educated summer people with money who have been coming to Maine for several generations. The groom's family are down easters with working class roots and a certain resentment toward the summer people who avoid the dreaded winters that make Mainers such hearty people. The groom's mother, Jane is the caretaker of the bride's family's house in the winter and her crew cleans their house all year long. The bride's mother is a

domineering woman who is used to getting her own way and has deeply rooted plans for her offspring that are sidelined by their own desires.

Waldman's words are well-chosen, she sets a stage, and her book is extremely well-paced. You see how the various characters handle their grief over three summers and the twists and turns their lives take. The book is soaked with an accurately captured portrayal of loss in various ways. It is a super book for summer, but it is also a book I would recommend to someone who has had a tough time accepting a loss some years back. I tried to de-construct her writing style to figure out how she made it read as well as it did.

Indeed I would recommend this book, and it would be a great airplane read as it is a page-turner. I will look for her other books.

The author is married to novelist Michael Chabon and was lambasted some years back by the media for a comment she made that she loves her husband more than her four children, that he came first in the hierarchy. I enjoyed her interview that you can find on-line and it made reading the book a richer experience.

Cathe Olson says

I love reading a book when I have no idea what it will be about and I can be completely surprised. Well, that's what happened with this one because the ARC I received had no description on it. Red Hook Road starts off just a little slow with a fancy wedding. A girl from a rich summer family marries a Maine "local" boy and, while the families are not quite thrilled, they are reconciled to it. Waldman really captures the feel of a wedding . . . it is kind of slow as you wait for the bride and groom to be finished with the dang pictures and get to the reception. But then wham--something happens that changes both the bride and groom's family's lives forever and the rest of the book is how they deal with it. The book had great characters and lots of tension in the relationships, not only between the families but within the families themselves. I especially loved the elderly violinist grandfather and his young flower girl who becomes his protégé and blossoms (excuse the pun) under his attention. I thought this book was just great--definitely another winner from Waldman.

Britany says

I have had Red Hook Road on my list to read for quite a long time. I was excited to jump into this "summer read." I was disappointed. Follows two families tied together by a marriage, which ends in tragedy before the reception even starts.

The Copakens have a large summer house on the coast of Maine in Red Hook. The Tetherly's have been Red Hook "Lifers" and Jane, the matriarch, runs a cleaning service, and happens to have the Copaken's as clients. Her son falls in love with Becca Copaken and end up getting married. These two families couldn't be different, but end up coming together for the next four summers.

Overall, very depressing tone, and it felt like the characters constantly re-live these events every summer, and never move on. While their lives certainly continue to inter-cross, every character remains stuck in the past and can't seem to break free from the aftermath of that ill fated marriage.

Just felt sad overall and never really picked up for me.

K says

After reading Ayelet Waldman's *Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace*, I thought, hey – Ayelet and I could be friends! But now that I've read *Red Hook Road* I have to qualify that – we could be friends as long as she doesn't ask me for feedback on her fiction. And we probably wouldn't enjoy the same novels, judging from the writing style she seems to think is literary. Her writing isn't awful, but it is overdone. Way too much unnecessary detail, which I'm starting to think is characteristic of books like this one that describe a situation rather than telling a story.

“Red Hook Road” does have an interesting premise – it describes the aftermath of a tragedy where a bride and groom in Red Hook, Maine, are killed in a car accident on the way to their wedding reception. The bride and groom's two very different families (the bride is from a well-to-do, intellectual New York family who summers in Red Hook; the groom is from a working-class local Red Hook family) will always be linked by this tragedy, not necessarily willingly, as each family grieves in its own distinct way.

The story takes place over four summers, beginning with the summer of the wedding/death and picking up the following summer. I suppose this made sense since the bride's family were “summer people” and focusing on both families' lives during the year they spent apart would preclude writing about their interactions. The problem with writing the story this way, though, is that there was a continuity from one summer to the next that really shouldn't have existed. Each summer felt like it was taking place immediately after the previous one rather than a full year later. Did so little change during the nine months of fall, winter, and spring? Was there no development in any of the characters or in their lives? Why would I want to read about such boring people?

Another thing that got on my nerves was the subplot of the ten-year-old untapped musical prodigy (from the groom's family) developing this oh-so-sweet relationship with the 80-year-old former concert violinist (from the bride's family) now suffering Parkinson's. Many goodreads reviewers, even the negative ones, liked this part of the book so I guess I'm a curmudgeon. But it seemed so perfect and Disney-movie-ish, emotionally manipulative as child-centered subplots in adult novels often are. Of course, the girl couldn't just be mildly talented or curious – no, she had to be this complete musical genius whose potential had gone unnoticed until now. And the old man who thinks his career is over and suddenly discovers this new outlet, and the endearing child melting his crusted-over heart – isn't the whole clichéd thing just too heartwarming? Naturally, the girl just loves her music lessons with this tough, exacting teacher; she never gets restless or bored or cranky; she is perpetually motivated and determined to master the violin and, sure enough, she succeeds. This subplot was an excuse, it seemed, to explore the complicated dynamics of the wealthy bride's family offering the poor-but-proud groom's family generous opportunities for the girl to develop her musical talent, but in her zeal to develop this potentially interesting situation, Ayelet highly oversimplified the events which created it. This is ironic, because the situation could have been so much more interesting had the girl or the old man been more ambivalent about her talent and/or their lessons.

I also felt that Ayelet was trying too hard to achieve a certain literary style by including as much descriptive detail as possible, resulting in a terribly overwritten book. Certainly the right details judiciously chosen can enhance a story or simply be poetic in their own right, but when you include too many they just weigh down the story (or make it even more irritating when there doesn't seem to be a story, which was mostly the case here). I appreciate that Ayelet was trying to make her book character-driven rather than plot-driven and I

usually consider that a good thing; however, there were times when I just wished something would happen already.

And truthfully, I don't even know if you can call this a character-driven story considering that I never really felt like I knew the individual characters all that well. I appreciated the fact that the characters were human beings with strengths and failings, but Ayelet didn't succeed in getting any of them to the point where I was actually feeling their inner life or rooting for any of them; they felt more like people I was observing in the park than like people I knew intimately. Additionally, the groom's brother with the scholarship to Amherst seemed marginally articulate which I found odd; surely a guy with a full scholarship to Amherst can string together an intelligent sentence, can't he? Or is this the only way Ayelet knows to write working-class characters?

I will go ahead and give this two stars for an interesting premise and competent if overdone writing; it's not a Harlequin. But I can't honestly recommend it.

Julie says

This book was quite a disappointment. It began with a terrible tragedy – the death of a young couple in a car accident on their wedding day. The rest took place during the following few summers in Maine as the families dealing with their loss attempt to fulfill the legacies of the deceased. I was uninterested. The characters were unsympathetic and I found many of their interests, like boxing and sailing, boring. The only engaging plotline involved the bride's virtuoso violinist grandfather and his relationship with his gifted protégé. Overall, the lives of these two families didn't hold my interest and I became exhausted of their grieving. The conclusion was anticlimactic and whatever point the author was trying to make was extremely tedious to get to. The writing itself did not lack skill, but the story fell flat.

I received a complimentary copy of this book via the Amazon Vine Program.

christa says

I come to you with, curiously, no complaints about Ayelet Waldman's "Red Hook Road." I believe the fiery ginger has written her best novel to date, possibly the best novel she can write, and it is pretty damn good.

This is what literary limbo looks like. It's a place where you read a book, enjoy said book, probably won't try to jam it down anyone's pants with a breathless "You. Must. Read. This." But if anyone asks your opinion of the work, you will beam like a Glo-Worm, and maybe throw in an appreciative sigh. List 101 things you liked about it -- the pace, the characters, the tone. It's so neutral that you can safely pass it along to your mother as an emergency birthday gift with positive results and without being accused of only reading books about men who -ectomy their own leg bones to use as weaponry.

Kudos, Waldman.

The prelude is a perfectly painted portrait of a wedding day. The party and extended family arranged for a photograph. And those minor hiccups that differentiate this special day from the special day of a kazillion

other couples: the flower girl can't find her flowers, the best men are hung over and still smell of a stolen toke or two. The father of the bride is wearing tennis shoes. The happy couple are childhood sweethearts -- a boat builder and a decent violin player. Becky summers in this little town in Maine that her ancestors built; John is a townie whose mother cleans Becky's family's house. The photographs are taken, the guests move on to the reception and wait the arrival of the newly minted Mr. and Mrs. Tetherly. Instead, John's brother Matt shows up, disheveled and crazed. He had been following the limousine. There was an accident. Becky and John are dead. Corpses in wedding ware.

The rest of the novel is divided into four chapters, each marking another year after the tragedy. It is a textbook of grief from different vantage points. Becky's mother Iris, and her need to control her environment, John's mother Jane, and her resentment toward these upper-crust meddlers. Becky's sister Ruthie, a second-place sibling who throws herself into school, a trajectory similar to the one her mother took. She is unable to find closure or an outlet for her pain. Matt, who takes up John's dream to rehabilitate an old sail boat with the intent of moving to the Caribbean and providing tours and leisure aboard the salvaged boat. (Then, later, falling into a super-secret relationship with Ruthie). Becky's father, at mid-life, makes a return to boxing. Becky's grandfather, an ancient violin virtuoso, finds it impossible to grieve after all the shit he has seen and people he has lost. He discovers that the flower girl, Samantha, has a ridiculous ear for music. He spends his time encouraging her gift.

The pacing of this book is perfect. As if Waldman -- who's virtual identity is that of a rapid-fire speaker, a no-nonsense loud-mouth (in a good way, IMO, but not in everyone's), who's opinions fly out of her finger tips like silver bullets -- took a deep breath and began slowly weaving a tale.

I would imagine there would be a tendency to be emotionally manipulative with the story. To really wring out the reader, and leave her cold-clocked and heaving. But Waldman takes the long way around the cheap route, finding middle ground between loving the characters, empathizing with them, but not bleeding the tear ducts dry. She handles the subject, grief, in a realistic way. While each of the characters has a different response, there is overlap in their emotions that keeps it from feeling false.

It is the last chapter, or Coda as it is called in the novel, that is ... gross world alert ... beautiful. It is the perfect finish for the story, one that doesn't answer every loose end with a neatly gift-wrapped finale. It reads almost like poetry, or a self-contained short story, and packs a pretty big Wow.

"Red Hook Road" might make my Top Ten of 2010, somewhere around No. 8 or No. 9. Mostly, it is a rainy day one-sitter when you just want to run your eyes over words, and emerge eight hours later satisfied.

Gretchen Achilles says

I got this through the first reads program. I like Waldman's articles and non fiction, but having read this and her previous novel, *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*, I hate her fiction. She describes every setting in such tedious detail, you want to scream. It disguises any plot going on, which in these two novels was "suspenseful". It is an irritating device to wade through all the loooonnnng descriptions of wherever her characters might be, then something tragic happens, only you don't know what it is, because it will take another 20 pages to describe everyone's reaction and what they were wearing.

Anne (Booklady) Molinarolo says

I struggled both with this novel and how I was going to rate it. It is well written, but really overly written. I'm not sure if that Ayelet Waldman consciously did that on purpose or was too concerned about a perfect treatise on overwhelming grief that binds two families forever. A terrible accident on Red Hook Road leaves a bride and groom dead. Their families at the reception hall are devastated. And that summer and the three subsequent summers tell the tale of how they have dealt with that grief. I personally didn't feel any emotional connection with Iris and Jane. I don't know if I should have because Waldman didn't show or tell me what happened to the two women other than those summers. I felt more emotionally connected to the grandfather and Jane's sister's adopted daughter. That sub-plot kept me reading the novel, not the main story line. It became an intellectual study of the women's grief.

How could it not when pages were devoted to describing a Victorian Home or the Grange Hall and only a few paragraph's devoted to Iris's needy and clingy daughter. Her husband is a disappointment to her and the dissolution of their marriage was not surprising. Very clinical on emotional content while places and things are described to the minute detail ad nauseous throughout the novel. Maine is beautiful in the summer, I get that. But beauty and healing can be found in grief also. I'm not surprised that other readers identified with the little girl and the infirmed grandfather story line. Their connection is beautiful and real. I could hear the violin sing. Sure the plot line was Pollyannish, but it was the most real story in the whole novel. I give a 3 star rating on the writing only. The overwriting that I believe to be meant as "literary" detracted from Iris and Jane's story. I should care about them, but I'm sure if I do.

Rebekah O'Dell says

I literally gulped down this book. In one sitting.

First of all, allow me to confess that the real reason I pulled this book out of my TBR pile is because I think the cover design is beautiful. And I wanted to read something beautiful. I wasn't disappointed.

Waldman's novel opens with a graceful "prelude" — a sixteen-page description of a photographer attempting to take a large family portrait after a wedding. While the photographer attempts to wrangle various family members and configure the perfect shot, the cast of characters is presented and relationships are revealed. It sounds plodding, doesn't it — but it was gorgeous and evocative, setting the tone for a "compulsively readable" story of two families over the course of four summers.

Immediately after the family portrait for Becca and John's wedding, the bride and groom are killed in a horrific car accident on the way to their reception. The four summers' action examines the aftermath — how these two very different families grieve, adapt, and evolve in the face of unimaginable tragedy.

Beyond the characters' individual and collective grief over the loss of Becca and John, conflict is created in the relationship between Iris and Jane, the mothers of the respective bride and groom. Iris' marriage to Daniel begins to fall apart at the seams. Ruthie, Iris and Daniel's daughter, becomes unmoored and seeks solace in the arms of Matt, John's brother.

It sounds melodramatic, but it's not. This novel works ... although it's hard to pinpoint exactly why. Partly, Waldman crafts what boils down to a simply good story. The plot is tragic and hopeful at once. The coast of

Maine comes to life — not in an overly-descriptive or cheesy way. Rather, Waldman's prose is transporting — another delightful example of the importance of the role of place in literature. (I've really been on a soapbox with that recently, haven't I?) The characters are well-rounded and real.

The prose is lovely. And perhaps this is what makes the most significant difference in making Red Hook Road real literature rather than something simpler and more stereotypical. There is a strong motif of music throughout the novel, reinforced by the Prelude and Coda which open and close the novel. Further, Waldman subtly explores the relationship and juxtaposition of music and literature in terms of their study versus the passions they ignite.

I really enjoyed this novel, so much so that I will probably pursue reading Waldman's other work in the future. Red Hook Road was a surprise treat!

Kelly says

A sentimental, weepy soap opera of a read about two families dealing with the tragic loss of two children that occurred in one of the more awful ways you can think of. The sort of novel where people heal in literary ways rather than actual ones, and metaphors give us the moral at the end. There were occasionally well done sentences, snuck in where they didn't matter, but I started skimming near the end, since it couldn't possibly matter if I skipped a few pages, either to the plot or characters.

I will say that I think that novels of this kind I have read (this is far from the first), novels that generally go into categories like "family sagas" or "beach reads" or, most annoyingly of all, "chick lit", take the time to address something that is often unacknowledged in a supposedly egalitarian US society: the very real effects that class has on your mindset, the course of your life and your choices. Some of it due to necessity, some of it due to the things you put on yourself, being self defeating. There are a whole lot of nasty class issues that are all over this novel that I wouldn't expect to see, especially given how unattractive it makes some of these characters seem. And they are not truly resolved, not even at the end, which seems realistic, rather than romanticized, as one might expect. So an extra star for that and for some occasionally lovely writing, oh, and finally, for not talking down to your audience about the classical music that plays a large part in the plot here. That would have been beyond tolerating, however understandable the urge to overexplain might be to a non-expert audience.

I can't really recommend this on its writing merits, but I imagine there are some who might enjoy this story. Just not me.

Lisa says

Recently, Literary Agent and Author Nathan Bransford suggested that the question one should ask when reading a piece of creative writing is - did the author achieve what he or she set out to do?

I would love to ask Ayelet Waldman what she set out to do when she wrote Red Hook Road. For example: Did she set out to make me cry while I sat in Mission Tire waiting for the new tires and rotation? Or did she mean to make me relate to character Iris who has control issues?

Hang on, this isn't about me, is it?

I have no idea what Waldman set out to do. I'm just not that deep. In fact, I'm a very shallow reader. I know - I'll tweet her and see what she has to say.

Wait - that's not right either. Waldman is on vacation. I'll Google it. Here's a bit of what SFGate.com has to say in summary:

Though the novel concerns a number of characters, the bulk of the time is spent examining Iris and Jane. The women's differences and their class discomfort leave them at odds, though the tension between them goes largely unspoken. The women don't really like each other, don't really want to deal with each other, as in-laws or as ex-in-laws. And yet they must. Each woman is high-handed and controlling in her own way.

Okay, so I can identify (just a bit) with the Iris character because of her control issues and with the Jane character because of the chiplets she carries on her working class shoulders.

So what, right? I know.

So what if Waldman intended to write a novel about how people interact at their best and their worst, how they push their own stuff onto others and how they want what's best for those they love even if their loved ones know better what is right for them. How they deal with love and loss and hope and insecurity. How they are human and floundering and grasping for some sense of normalcy after Waldman drops them into this impossible, tie-you-up-in-knots situation that left me fretful about my own children?

The human connection - for good and bad is the biggest player in this story.

And Waldman's writing is beautiful.

Maureen Ann says

One of the things I loved most about this book occurred at the very end. Ruthie (the main character, as it turned out) was wondering whether one simple choice could affect everything. She said that just taking a left where one could have taken a right might have been the reason for things to turn out as they had. This was a theme for the book, as the sentiment was echoed in Iris' thoughts about the butterfly effect just after her daughter Becca was killed in a car accident on her wedding day.

Ruthie speculated that sometimes the choice of left or right could become so overwhelming that one might become stuck in a rut. The only cure for that was just making a decision and taking a step forward. She did not really focus on determining right or wrong, just the process of making a decision and taking action. It is the idea of movement before motivation.

And in the end, it was just a boat, as Matt said. Just a boat could be replaced. But sometimes the burden of that boat is too much and deserves to be cast off.

Nicole says

Red Hook Road by Ayelet Waldman needs no introduction, mainly because you just need to go out and get this book.

Oh Ayelet, how you love to break my heart. I knew what I was getting into; after all, I read the book flap. But I didn't know that I wasn't going to be able to get out of bed for want of reading just two more pages. I didn't know that I was going to cry and long for these two people whom I never met, and truly only spent seven pages (if that!) with. I didn't know that my heart would break along with their devastated families.

Red Hook Road sees John and Becca on their wedding day, 10 years in the making. Sadly, they are killed just an hour after they become man and wife, and they leave their families with each other and the heartbreak. What you see are the next three summers in the lives of these families.

This book tore at my heart until it couldn't be torn anymore--then I read the coda, which socked me in the stomach and I needed a few mind-blowing moments to breathe again. What a lovely, heart-wrenching, and full-bodied piece of literature this is. And how I wish I could experience the longing and heartbreak for the first time all over again.

Lisa says

I was reluctant to read this book because of the tragedy that occurs in the beginning. Having lost a sibling, I didn't really want to read a book about a family losing its bride and groom en route to the reception. My friends assured me this was worth reading and I'd be able to handle it.

As I was told, this book doesn't focus on the tragedy itself, but rather, its ramifications. I was definitely able to relate to Ruthie, as well as other members of her family. This is another one of those books that's all about the every day, yet a lot occurs in those moments. The writing is nice; the descriptions spot on and lyrical. Altogether, a lovely story about surviving, and being alive.

Ron Charles says

One of my favorite Joyce Carol Oates novels -- "The Falls" -- opens with the groom drowning a few hours after his wedding night. Now, Ayelet Waldman cuts the honeymoon even shorter: In her new novel, "Red Hook Road," the groom and the bride die in a traffic accident between the church and the reception. Anyone hoping to push this grim sub-genre further will have to slay the newlyweds at the altar. But whereas Oates uses that nuptial tragedy for her own weird brand of macabre comedy, Waldman sometimes seems engaged in an act of emotional masochism. It's hard to look away, even when you can smell the burning rubber of such expert manipulation.

Fittingly, "Red Hook Road" begins with the taking of the wedding photos, that tense herding of giddy bridesmaids, hungover groomsmen and anxious parents when the artificiality of the marriage ceremony is spun to its highest sugary peaks. Waldman applies a dollop of satire, but the summer day could not be more

lovely: The white clapboard church along the Maine shore, the carefully restored reception hall, the sumptuous food, all of it has been expensively arranged with "a kind of rustic opulence, at once simple and glorious." The better to wound us on page 34 when the groom's brother stumbles in "ashen, his bow tie askew," causing the bride's sister to stand "frozen in place, as if nailed to the ground." (Tragically, in moments of real drama, Waldman steers directly into oncoming clichés.)

Not to speak ill of the dead, but it would have been nice if the late groom and his brief wife hadn't been such paragons of romantic bliss. Sweethearts since they were 16, Becca and John are the kindest, smartest, prettiest couple you'd ever want to meet: She plays the violin; he designs yachts. I expected bluebirds to bring the veil.

Of course, Waldman knows a thing or two about perfect unions herself. Five years ago, this Harvard-trained lawyer rubbed our faces in her fairy-tale marriage to America's hippest writer, Pulitzer Prize-winner Michael Chabon. She published an essay proclaiming that she'd rather have sex with Chabon -- "always vital, even torrid" -- than build Lego castles with her kids (who wouldn't?). Then, per the standard PR routine, she feigned shock and disappointment when that column established her as the infamous "Bad Mother" of a thousand op-eds, blog postings and the inevitable Oprah appearance. And last year she published an unapologetic collection called "Bad Mother: A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities, and Occasional Moments of Grace."

Since she gave up her law career, most of what Waldman has published has been about motherhood, including the snappy books in her "Mommy-Track" mystery series. But while her nonfiction is often witty, her recent novels reflect the lingering agony of her decision to terminate a pregnancy after learning that her fetus carried a genetic defect. The mother in her previous novel, "Love and Other Impossible Pursuits" (2006), has lost her baby to AIDS. And now, "Red Hook Road" focuses on two mothers who lose their adult children on what was to be the happiest day of their lives.

I never realized it before, but my shelves are depressed by a wide range of fine novels about grief, a catalogue of smothered pain that includes Elizabeth Strout's "Abide With Me," Kiara Brinkman's "Up High in the Trees," Sue Miller's "Lake Shore Limited," Francine Prose's "Goldengrove" and even offbeat novels like Alice Sebold's "The Lovely Bones," Stephen King's "Lisey's Story" and Reif Larsen's "The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet." Ask your friends what novel provided a sounding board for their sorrow, and you'll be surprised by how many shades of black there are.

Waldman's sharp eye for social detail makes her particularly good with the loneliness and awkwardness of modern grief. The abandonment of all those fussy Victorian customs along with the loss of any common religious vocabulary leave her characters wandering in a boundless but unacknowledged cloud of sadness, resenting neighbors' nervous platitudes ("The Lord don't give us more than we can bear") and empty, earnest questions ("How are you doing?"). The story, organized around the first three anniversaries of Becca and John's death, is a sobering reminder that when it comes to commemorating loss, we're all bumping around in the dark.

Waldman writes beautifully about "the persistence of love and work and affection in the face of sorrow," but what's impressive about "Red Hook Road" isn't limited to her thoughts on grief. Along with lots of wonderful detail about restoring wooden boats and an engaging subplot involving classical music, her best insights are about class conflict in a modest Maine town that endures an annual three-month influx of wealthy, sophisticated visitors who like to think the place belongs to them. The bride's mother, Iris, is a fantastic creation -- prickly and demanding, so determined to control every aspect of life that she seems to be daring the gods to scuttle her plans. A professor of Holocaust studies at Columbia University, Iris is a

brilliant, aggressive woman who has been meticulously rehabilitating her summer cottage and affirming her position in East Red Hook for decades. On the wedding day, Waldman explains, "all her hopes for the Grange Hall and for the place that she had made for herself in the village had reached their apotheosis. In this beautiful building first imagined and financed by her great-great-grandfather, her daughter would celebrate her marriage to a man whose roots in the town went deeper even than her own."

But there's the rub -- or the rube: Her counterpart, Jane, the groom's mother, is a flinty Mainer who used to clean Iris's house and grits her teeth at the professor's obnoxious presumptuousness. To Jane, even Iris's generosity seems infected with her desire to control everyone, an impression Iris senses but seems powerless to resist making. Waldman brings out the humor and the distress of their culture clash: "Jane had no interest in any relationship with Iris other than the most formal, her manner making Iris so uncomfortable that she inevitably found herself fulfilling what she imagined to be Jane's worst expectations of the fancy-pants New York from-away: frivolous, silly, and above all, condescending. When Iris spoke to Jane, her voice crept into a high, shrill register and she said the most absurd things. . . . It maddened Iris to find herself forced to act out the position of lady of the manor." But if marriage makes in-laws strange bedfellows, grief is an even more brutal matchmaker, and Waldman follows the awkward dance of these two bereft mothers over the next few years as they and their families try to negotiate the gaping hole in their lives.

Sadly, the end of the novel is a car wreck of a different sort, a sudden loss of narrative control that sends the story careening into melodrama and psychological breakthroughs. Until that point, though, Waldman keeps her eyes on the road, carrying us into dark territory with wisdom and grace. As usual, she offers something to admire and something to annoy -- something borrowed, something blue. Yes, it's an emotional workout, even if you don't usually cry at weddings, but it's worth attending for the more thoughtful reflections that linger after the bouquets have wilted.

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M says

Ayelet Waldman made a calculated decision in writing this that more is more. More metaphors, more details, more figurative language surely means ... better writing?

Not so much. I did not hate this book, at all, as much as I just felt dragged through it. In fact, it not evoking feelings of hatred might even be more of what was wrong with the book - I just didn't care enough to. The characters were types more than people, and annoying ones at that, and every buttoning of every button made for a rather turgid prose. The premise is interesting enough- Waldman builds the story, in essence, around this amorphous and complicated concept of mechutanim, the yiddish word for families that marry into each other. These two families are connected in truth for one hour before their respective son and daughter die tragically en route to the dinner of their wedding, yet they are now intertwined in all sorts of interesting ways.

SO I agree with my sister that while the book being split into summers made sense as this book was about a family that summers in Maine and hence that is their connection etc, it felt weird to miss whole years of these people's lives and have it seem as though nothing changed. I also found that the two passions cited here, fixing old boats and playing the violin, were incredibly uninteresting. Get over the boat, I wanted to say, many times, to the guy fixing it, and mind your own freaking business, I wanted to say, to pushy annoying (Jewish) Iris who essentially wants to kidnap the adopted sort of niece of her machatanesta so she can get her to be the famous violinist her dead daughter probably couldn't have been anyway. Overall the

whole let's relive the dead daughter's life thing has been done so many times. Let's try something new if we are dealing with senseless tragedy, shall we?

Mindy says

This was a good read. I loved this paragraph at almost the end of the book:

"That was true, Iris would sometimes think, about marriage: it was only a boat, too. A wooden boat, difficult to build, even more difficult to maintain, whose beauty derived at least in part from its unlikelihood. Long ago the pragmatic justifications for both marriage and wooden-boat building had been lost or superseded. Why invest countless hours, years, and dollars in planing and carving, gluing and fastening, caulking and fairing, when a fiberglass boat can be had at a fraction of the cost? Why struggle to maintain love and commitment over decades when there were far easier ways to live, ones that required no effort or attention to prevent corrosion and rot? Why continue to pour your heart into these obsolete arts? Because their beauty, the way they connect you to your history and to the living world, justifies your efforts. A long marriage, like a classic wooden boat, could be a thing of grace, but only if great effort was devoted to its maintenance. At first your notions of your life with another were no more substantial than a pattern laid down in plywood. Then year by year you constructed the frame around the form, and began layering memories, griefs, and small triumphs like strips of veneer planking bent around the hull of everyday routine. You sanded down the rough edges, patched the misunderstandings, faired the petty betrayals. Sometimes you sprung a leak. You fell apart in rough weather or were smashed on devouring rocks. But then, as now, in the teeth of a storm, when it seemed like all was lost, the timber swelled, the leak sealed up, and you found that your craft was, after all, sea-kindly."

Jessica Woodbury says

I like Ayelet Waldman. But I think I have to recognize that I don't like her the way I like someone like Thomas Hardy, for example. I like Hardy's books but I'm not sure he and I would have much to talk about. Whereas I would be really happy to have lunch with Waldman. I like her attitude, I like her essays, I like her blunt honesty.

But, I've read 2 of her other books. I tried another and couldn't get through. And this one... well, I seriously considered not finishing it. I just don't like her books. I need to accept that.

This book suffered from the really annoying problem of the perfect dead people. It managed to be immersed in grief without actually exploring it. I got to the point where I was constantly cataloging its flaws. Waldman needs to show, not tell. She is always describing her characters' emotions in great detail (often in long annoying lists: she felt a, she felt b, she felt c, etc.) but when they finally do something that manifests their feelings she doesn't let the action speak for itself. She once again has to tell you in detail what she just showed you.

Early on I would anticipate an upcoming plot point and think, "Nah, she wouldn't do that." And then she would. Every time. I even thought about halfway through that at least she wouldn't throw all the characters together at the end in a big storm at sea where they could all drown. Oh wait. She did.

I like Waldman. I will still have lunch with her any day. But I think I need to stop reading her books.

Kathleen says

During a week filled with bad news, which also happened to be the first week of our vacation, I ambled to my tiny indie bookstore at the beach to buy *Freedom* (pre-Oprah hee haw). It was for sale nationally, but the season was winding down on the Outer Banks and the store had not ordered it to stock. Wah! So I perused and recognized Red Hook Road's author, Ayelet Waldman. I loved what I had read of her husband's work, so I bought it --full price! in hardcover! (hey -it was vacation). Back on the sand, I opened it, read a few paragraphs and recognized that this book is about grieving. NO! I had enough sadness that week --I really didn't want to wallow in it. It was in my hands though and I did recall listening to a radio interview with her where she talked about a seminal life moment for her and her husband concerning a baby. I decided I could probably learn about the process of grieving so I would continue.

As I read, I found it easy to get involved with the well-drawn characters. There are enough of them to keep the action going. I did think that she was a very good, plain writer but I wasn't overly engaged. In fact, I thought the storyline was very much the same as the plot of *RabbitHole* which I had seen on Broadway a few seasons ago. I suspected the arc of grief is the same, but this accounting had many ways of handling that arc that were a lot like the play. I also recognized that the people I was most interested in were the women in this book - and how often does that happen? Women as the major players in a serious study. So, I read on, but with detachment...and then, I got to the last chapters. In them, she pulls the story together in a *deus ex machina* manner. Hackneyed, right? Don't tell my emotions. I was finishing it while sitting in a Starbucks in Hackensack. When the tears began, I thought I could keep them in my eyes, but soon they were coursing. Ms Waldman pulls it all together and pulls everything out of you at once in such a delicate, competent manner. It was so right.
