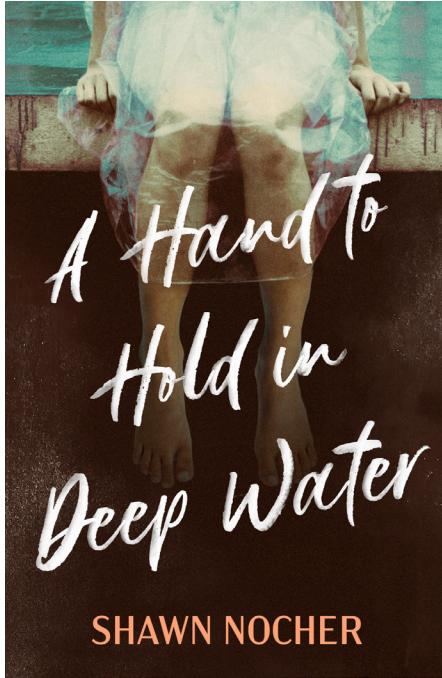


A HAND TO HOLD IN DEEP WATER

By Shawn Nocher



A HAND TO HOLD IN DEEP WATER, written by debut author Shawn Nocher (Blackstone Publishing; Hardcover) hits the bookshelves on June 22, 2021. It is a heart-felt tale centered around one uniquely blended family.

Willy Cherrymill and his stepdaughter, Lacey, are deeply bruised by a past brimming with unanswered questions. It's been thirty years since May DuBerry, Willy's young wife and Lacey's mother, abandoned them both leaving Willy to raise Lacey alone.

Lacey Cherrymill is smart, stubborn, and focused. She's also a single mother to a young daughter recently diagnosed with a devastating illness. The last thing she needs to think about right now is the betrayal that rocked her childhood. Reluctantly, she has returned to her rural beginnings, a former dairy farm in the Maryland countryside, and to Willy, a man steeped in his own disappointments and all the guilt that goes with them.

Together they will pool their wobbly emotional resources to take care of Lacey's daughter, Tasha, all the while trying to skirt the issue of May's mysterious disappearance. But try as she might, Lacey can't leave it alone. Just where is May DuBerry Cherrymill and why did she leave them, and how is it that they have never talked about the wreckage she left behind?

A Hand to Hold in Deep Water is a deeply felt narrative about mothers and daughters, the legacy of secrets, the way we make a family, and the love of those who walk us through our deepest pain. It is about the way we are tethered to one another and how we choose to wear those bindings. These are characters you won't soon forget and, more so, won't want to leave behind when you turn the last page.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE INFLUENCE OF WATER.

- 1) The book revolves around three bodies of water in three locations: Ocracoke Island, The St. Mary's River, and the farm with its large pond. Discuss the meaning of these locations and the part water plays in the book.
- 2) May finds it impossible to learn to swim and yet she is dangerously drawn to water. Discuss the significance of this and in what ways it may mirror her struggle.

ANIMALS: BOTH PETS AND LIVESTOCK.

1. We are introduced to numerous animals in the book. How do the characters' experiences with different animals, both wild and domestic, affect the characters' understanding of their own situation.

LIFE ON THE FARM V. LIFE ON THE WATER.

1. May is struck by the difference between life on the water and life on the farm and the difference between fishing and farming. At one point she says, “I spent all my life waiting to take what the earth give up, and he spent all his life putting into the earth what he wants to get back.” What does she mean by this and what does her understanding reveal about their relationship and May’s helplessness specifically?

RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR IMPACT.

1. Discuss the ways in which Mac and Lacey’s relationship is altered once Tasha is born. In light of Lacey’s past, specifically her childhood, why do you think this happens?
2. What reason does Willy give for not looking for May? What does Willy finally come to understand about his reluctance to look for her and do you think that says anything significant about how much or the way in which he loved May?
3. There is a significant age gap between Willy and May. How does Willy both navigate and justify this difference in age when he first meets May and again when he becomes engaged to her. Does his understanding change by the end of the book?
4. When we first meet Willy he is lonely, set in his ways, and generally disappointed by life. Why is this the case and in what ways does he change by the end of the book.

MAY AND MAY’S EFFECT ON THE FAMILY IN LATER YEARS.

1. May disappears in 1972 after a long battle with depression. Was trauma the cause of her depression? Do you think her traditional role as a young wife and mother exacerbated her illness? Given the times, do you think May could have been helped if she had been open with Willy about what had happened to her?
2. Lacey decides not to tell Willy about the diary. How does she come to that decision? What did she imagine would happen to Willy if she shared it with him? In what ways does this decision suggest a change in Lacey? Do you agree with her decision?
3. May’s personal story is told through her diary. Why do you think the author chose to tell us about May through her diary and how does the diary format affect the reader’s understanding of May.

LACEY’S PERSONAL BATTLES.

1. Discuss the way Lacey’s feelings toward her church, and God in particular, have changed since her childhood. Why do you think this is? What is meant by “It can’t be said that she doesn’t believe in God. She does. She just doesn’t trust him.”
2. At one point Lacey admits she is angry at Tasha for being sick. Is her anger understandable on any level? How does recognizing her anger make her feel?

THE AUTHOR’S CREATIVE CHOICES.

1. The Prologue takes place eight months before the book opens. In what ways does the prologue foreshadow what happens to Lacey and Tasha a year later and what does the prologue tell you about Lacey and her parenting of Tasha?
2. Secrets is a predominant theme in the book. May refuses to reveal who Lacey’s father is. Lacey won’t tell Willy her real reason for not marrying Mac or her reason for coming back to the farm with Tasha. Aunt Virgie won’t reveal to Lacey her biological father. Discuss the way these secrets lead to assumptions and misunderstandings amongst the characters.

AUTHOR BIO



Shawn Nocher's compelling short stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Eunoia Review*, and *MoonPark Review*, and she has been longlisted or won honorable mentions from both *SmokeLong Quarterly* and *Glimmer Train*.

She earned her master of arts in writing at Johns Hopkins University, has given wings to two children, and lives with her husband and an assortment of sassy rescue animals in Baltimore, Maryland, where she writes in a room of her own. This is her first novel.

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