

8-30-2016

Float by JoeAnn Hart

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Recommended Citation

Payne, Tonia L. (2016) "Float by JoeAnn Hart," *The Goose*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 54.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/54>

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Float Carries Too Much Weight

***Float* by JOEANN HART**

Ashland Creek, 2013 \$17.95

Reviewed by **TONIA L. PAYNE**

JoeAnn Hart is an award-winning writer whose work includes essays, articles, and perhaps most notably eco-fiction. Among her awards are the PEN New England Discovery Award in Fiction and the Doug Fir Fiction Award, which was awarded to a short story that is a slightly modified version of the first two chapters of the novel *Float*. As is the case with Hart's previous novel *Addled*, *Float* uses fiction also to bring environmental concerns to light.

Float tells the story of Duncan Leland, a hapless New Englander whose business—Seacrest's Ocean Products of Maine, which turns fishery waste into fertilizer—is in dire financial straits and whose marriage is on the rocks. Contributing to Duncan's woes is the debt he incurred to retrofit his processing plant so it would meet stringent environmental regulations and that one of his business lieutenants, Annuncia, has a tendency to frighten off potential suppliers of the necessary fish guts by haranguing the suppliers about unsustainable fishing practices. The novel's setting—fictional Port Ellery, Maine, which like most coastal New England towns is facing collapsing fisheries and accompanying environmental woes—allows Hart room to call attention to the perils of unregulated waste, including not only the fish guts and "bycatch" dumped into the harbor rather than going to Duncan's manufactory but also the rest of the human detritus that is poisoning the seas.

In the opening scene, Duncan is staring, in a funk, out his office window and sees below him the words "God Help Us" written on the beach (2). Although "the message faced the harbor, not him, so it didn't appear to be a personal accusation, more like a random act of prayer" (3), Duncan decides that it must be obliterated before the tide can remove it, lest any potential investor see it as a negative commentary on Seacrest's. Duncan descends to the beach and begins rubbing out the letters, then begins to alter them, from "God Help Us" to "Go Help Us" to "Go Kelp" (3–4). He notices a seagull miserably tangled in a plastic six-pack ring, and after calling a friend who runs a seagull rescue operation, he manages to catch the bird and remove the torturous plastic.

All this is caught on video and spread to the media by a performance art group—the source of the message in the sand—and Duncan finds himself the center of a great deal of attention, not all of it positive. He is repeatedly helpless in fending off events that might lead to more dangerous consequences—and each event gives Hart a reason to point out all the dreadful things humans do to the oceans.

Duncan makes a rather irritatingly ineffectual protagonist; even his rescue of the gull is not effective, as the gull dies (the fate of most of "rescued" birds, as the novel points out) and ends up being (borderline illegally) added to the biological matter being processed by Seacrest's. Among the plot convolutions are Duncan's dealings with a possible former mob boss turned loan shark and his henchman, who has a highly trained ferret named Fingers; the culinary experimentations of one of Duncan's friends—one such experiment, a jellyfish soup, turns into a potential source of biologically sustainable plastic and

solvent (though nearly lethal as soup); Duncan's attempts to reconnect with his estranged wife and to come to terms with his fears about their bringing a baby into this damaged world; and the actions of Duncan's even more ineffectual brother and their mother, who is described as being insane, though her portrayal is more of someone who is merely charmingly dotty.

Oh, yes: and there's a hurricane.

Hart clearly enjoys the absurd, and there is certainly some humor to lighten the weight of the environmental message. Yet, as one reads, it all begins to feel heavy-handed: the equation between Duncan's life and the disintegrating harbor is all but pointed out in neon, and some of the names feel too weighty with significance: Annuncia making pronouncements; Adoniram, the artist whose work inspired the group who wrote "God Help Us" in the sand; Syrie, the old high school flame who wants to tempt Duncan away from his marriage and possibly into shady financial dealings. But that's minor compared to the preaching: pages of a character—or the narrator—reeling off facts about any environmental problem that can be expounded upon in the guise of forwarding the events.

Among the points that Hart makes, unobtrusively, is that humans seem incapable of learning. Early in the novel, an art curator explains that Adoniram's ephemeral messages obliterated by tides were "expressing [Adoniram's] belief that we have to learn the same things over and over again, in our lifetimes and the next. Old souls don't get wiser. Generations pass nothing on. We learn nothing" (49). The sentiment is restated at the end of the novel, as Duncan reminisces about all his father worked to pass on to his son and then realizes, "All these lessons, and yet he

had learned nothing" (265). The book also is rather too obvious in pointing out the irreconcilable mind-sets of those who care exclusively about financial advancement and those who care for the environment: as one minor character puts it, "I am willing to make a contribution to nature, but nature must be willing to make a contribution to me first! Who is going to pay for me to change my nets?" (23) Indeed, one might get the impression that the only people who take action to accommodate, instead of work against, the natural world, are more than a little loopy, like Duncan's mother, who feels (incorrectly, as it turns out), that allowing the natural world into her home (sand never swept out, waves allowed to wash through the foundations) will keep the structure safe through any storm.

Duncan's mess of a life is echoed in the mess we've made of the oceans, "the garbage of modern civilization. Almost all of it was plastic, which would never change, never go away, only keep building up until [we are] trapped alive, living and dying in an indestructible world of [our] own making" (103). The downer of a message is perhaps inevitable in any work of realistic fiction. However, the novel fails, ultimately, to do exactly what it states is the purpose of art: "In art, the trick is to go directly from the eye to the heart, skipping the brain altogether" (220). In thinking about the various whacky actions (artistic or PR) of those around him, Duncan considers that "executing a well-planned, bizarre gesture made people curious, and it made them feel" (276). The disappointment of the novel is that—although we may be curious, and moderately amused by the well-planned weaving of the plot skeins—the novel does little to touch the heart. We are preached at, but not moved, and only if we are moved will we truly take to heart, learn,

what we are being called upon to do in response to the sermon.

TONIA L. PAYNE is a tenured professor in the English department at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York, and she is a recipient of a SUNY Chancellor's Award for excellence in teaching. Among her scholarly publications are "'We Are Dirt: We Are Earth': Ursula Le Guin and the Problem of Extra-Terrestrialism" and "How Do We See

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