



Reading Group Gold

A Hole in the Heart

by Christopher Marquis

Introduction to *A Hole in the Heart*

“Midafternoon on a Tuesday, it occurred to Bean Jessup that she was forgetting her husband’s face.”

So begins this smart and charmingly written debut novel about a young woman trying to start over amid the grandeur of the Alaskan landscape and the creaky confines of an isolated fishing village and its relentless and pungent salmon cannery.

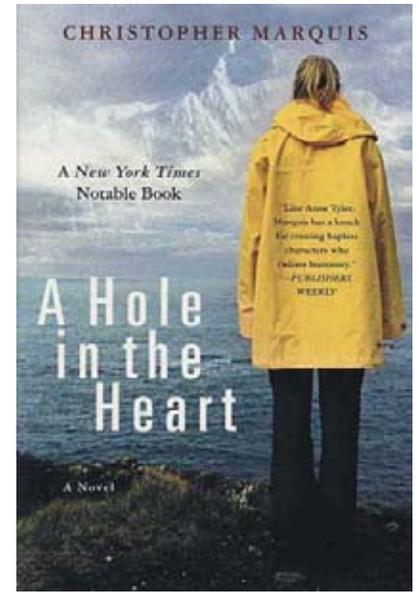
A Hole in the Heart is the story of what happens when Bean arrives after accepting a last-minute elementary-school-teaching job in a town of 2500 people on Alaska’s southern coast. Love and marriage follow in short order, surprising Bean, who feels that her husband is not only the best thing to happen to her, but the only good thing.

Then Mick vanishes leading amateur hikers--or “tuna” as the guides call them--up Mt. McKinley. Suddenly, Bean is thrown back upon herself and into the company of Mick’s mother Hanna, an arthritic woman in her seventies who believes that “a little larceny is good for the circulation.”

The pair chafe at first, but eventually become partners in a road trip back to California. Mike’s disappearance feels like a hole in the heart, they decide, and Hanna tells Bean to prize that hole; it’s something no one can take away from her. With gentle humor, pathos, and boundless stores of hope, Marquis writes of Bean’s struggle with early widowhood, loss, and moving on.

An avid bird-watcher, Bean takes much of her wisdom from the Pemberton Guide to Alaska Birds. Like the globe-crossing birds she so admires, she has struggled to get aloft, but for a delicious, perhaps fleeting moment in this marvelous novel, we see her glide.

Book Magazine selected Christopher Marquis as one of “Ten To Watch In 2003” for this “Proulxian saga.” With its first-rate evocation of landscape and its affectionately drawn characters, *A Hole in the Heart* marks the publication debut of a prodigiously talented writer.



ISBN: 978-0-312-30631-1 | 2004



Reading Group Gold

Praise for *A Hole in the Heart*

“Fortunate is the reader who is introduced to Chris Marquis’ intrepid heroine, Bean Jessup. Bean’s loves, losses, missteps, and triumphs will stay with you long after you finish this remarkably fresh first novel. Marquis’ knowledge of the ambiguities inherent in love is stunning.” - Anne Bernays, author of *Back Then: Two Lives in 1950s New York*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. In some ways, the Alaskan landscape plays the role of an important character. Discuss.
2. The evolution of Bean and Hanna’s relationship is central to the novel. What do they have to offer each other?
3. Bean is tentative and soft-spoken in public throughout much of the novel. On what occasions does she assert herself and take a stand?
4. Why is Bean fascinated by bird behavior? How do the excerpts from the Pemberton Guide enhance the story?
5. The novel deals with loss and starting over. Apart from the characters that die, what are other examples of loss (and recovery) in the story?
6. Are Mick and Bean well suited to each other?
7. Why does Hanna steal?
8. The (male) author chose to focus on the travails and sensibilities of a female character. Does this portrayal succeed? Should men write about women’s inner lives, and vice-versa?

About the Author

Christopher Marquis is a general assignment reporter at *The New York Times* in the Washington Bureau. Previously, he was a longtime correspondent at *The Miami Herald* where he covered Latin America. Marquis began writing the novel while on a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard. The author earned his way through the University of California at Berkeley by working “the slime line” at a cannery in Alaska during his summers.