

## To Be Sung Underwater

by Tom McNeal; New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2011, 448 pages, \$24.99

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Author Tom McNeal has written other books, including *Goodnight, Nebraska*, and short fiction. He has received such accolades as the James A. Michener Memorial prize and the California Book Award.

*To Be Sung Underwater* narrates the life experiences of Judith Whitman. As an adolescent, Judith is a quiet girl. She begins to notice the differences in her parents' personality and how their divorce changes them. Her personality gradually takes shape under the guidance of her father, with whom she spends her adolescence. She meets her first love, Willy Blunt, when she is 17. She keeps reminiscing on these early years throughout the

book. As an adult, she establishes a career in the film industry in Los Angeles and marries a banker whom she meets while in college. There are glimpses of dissatisfaction with her married life, as she wonders about her husband's fidelity. Judith increasingly feels disconnected from her husband and daughter, and life begins to feel mechanical and unfulfilling. Judith tries to recreate her earlier years, even renting a room under a fictitious name, and she decides to search for Willy to reexperience the love and connection she had with him as a teenager.

The main theme is about love and how it sustains the relationship over the years. It is also about the choices one makes about love and career. Another theme is parental influence on the child's life choices in terms of education, career, and marriage. The

story brings out the differences that Judith experiences between her love for Willy and the affection she has for her husband. Judith reflects heavily on her earlier life experiences, comparing the two men in her life with whom she is romantically involved.

Overall, this is a well-written book, although flashbacks to earlier life experiences were at times confusing. The story kept me interested and guessing all the way to the end. The author carefully shapes the character of Judith, who evolves gradually from a girl who is unsure of herself into a mature, confident woman. The imagery provides a sense of atmosphere, evoked by vivid descriptions of wind, temperature, smells, birds chirping, the morning mist, and the color of leaves. The principal characters Judith and Willy make an impact on the reader and evoke empathy as Judith struggles with love and sustaining it. The themes in this romantic fiction are traditional and familiar.

The reviewer reports no competing interests. ♦

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