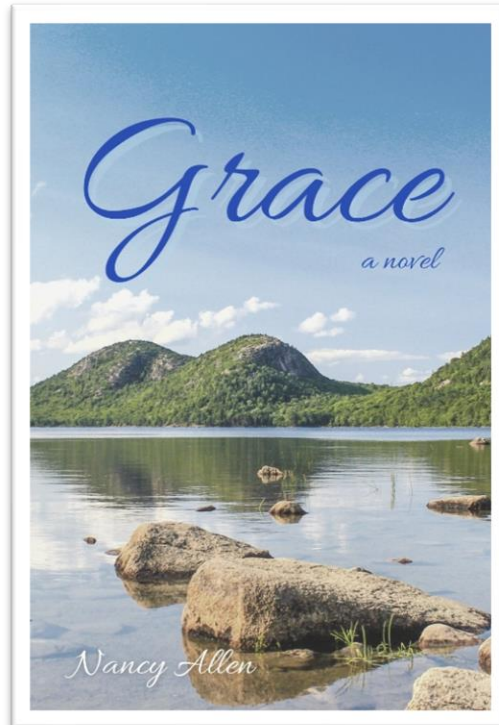




“Book Review: *Grace*”

By Samantha Hui



A poignant, multidimensional novel examining the pains commonly imposed upon women

Grace is a critical examination into the casual sexual harassment and assault all too common on campuses and in workplaces today. The novel questions whether women’s daily existence has improved all that much over the years, despite the seeming progress that has been made in terms of gender and racial equality.

Multifaceted, moving, and sincere, *Grace* is a must-read for those learning that obstinance can be violence.



“Unless we destroy existing structures—the church, commerce, government—and start again, vestiges of racism and sexism, greed, and wrong-headed passion will always be an issue.”

Catherine Finley has taken a job at Franklin College as the PhD Dean of Undergraduate Studies to be closer to her father as she fears she may not have too much longer with him. Getting adjusted to her new environment, she makes friendly connections (or so they appear) with her colleagues at the university. The more she finds comfort in those around her, the more the dark underbelly of the college reveals itself to her.

When she is sexually harassed by her boss and learns about his past as a sexual predator, those she believed she could trust not only remain silent but work to cover it up. They are “keeping the peace” for any claims made by her harasser.

Catherine’s experience with harassment and the subsequent disregard for the severity of the situation uproots her conception of women’s safety and happiness at home and in the workplace.

Two parallel storylines to Catherine’s are that of Hal and her father Douglas. Catherine’s colleague Hal, the Dean of Graduate Students, is conducting research for the purposes of writing another oral history on the Civil Rights Movement, a task that leads him to learn more about his mother and the secret life he never gained access to. Douglas, wanting to tell Catherine all he can in his final day, discloses to her all the stories of his infidelity and secret romance with the elusive Grace. Though Catherine, her father, and Hal are on three separate journeys and histories throughout the novel, their stories are more interconnected than they appear.

“Our true face never speaks. Our stories become our masks, protecting us from rejection.”

A strong aspect of the novel is its focus on both the mode and importance of storytelling. When appropriate, the characters’ stories are told as flashbacks whether they be as fond memories of a time that will never return or as traumatic experiences that might never be forgotten. The narrative is also sometimes written as letters between paramours. What



feels moving about this style of storytelling is its conjunction with the subject matter. So often, those who experience sexual harassment or assault can feel as if they are voiceless. Although she is fictional, Catherine's power and outspokenness in the face of the harassment is representative of the voice of women in the world.

“How does a woman carry this searing, painful memory? First kisses, the first boyfriend, and sex the first time were all good memories for Catherine. What if all that was erased by the violence, this loss of control over her body?”

Allen's novel is critical of hierarchies and campus politics, demanding a restructure or even a complete destruction of current power dynamics. In spite of this criticism, Allen reminds us that there is beauty and love in the world, all-be-it much more complex and messier than in the movies.

Grace takes a deep look at how women hide their shared trauma behind a polite grace, a grace that the oppressors and the silent are undeserving of. It's a novel of honesty in this way, of illustrating women are beyond this grace and deserving of respect, power, and their voice.