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For the Ruin family in 1970s California, as described by the precocious young Inez, life is complex. Her father, Paul, is self-obsessed, intrusive, and brilliant. He's also twice divorced, leaving Inez to bounce between two worlds and embracing neither-that of Paul's bohemian life in San Francisco and the more sedate world of her mother Connie, a Latin bombshell who plays tennis and attends EST seminars in the suburbs. As Inez progresses through high school we are witness to a remarkable family saga that renders a strange and fascinating slice of America in transition-one like the Ruins of California themselves, at once bold and innocent, creative and chaotic, obsessed and liberating.

The Ruins of California Details

Date : Published January 2nd 2007 by Penguin Books (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9781594482311

Author : Martha Sherrill

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Literature, American, Young Adult, Coming Of Age

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From Reader Review The Ruins of California for online ebook

Ryandake says

i have mixed feelings about this book, probably because i had some serious expectations going into it.

i mean, it's california, the protagonist is almost precisely my age, and grows up on my turf. admittedly, "my turf" is rather large--being almost all of california--and "my age" does not mean "my socioeconomic strata" or "my milieu" or even "my head space." but somehow i expected to identify more closely with the main character.

but apparently her california wasn't exactly my california. close, sometimes, but not quite a doob.

her california had a rather precocious interest in things like brand names, for example. mine failed to include brand names until the 80s (with the exception of Levi's--only the losers wore Wranglers, and if you wore anything other, you weren't even on the map). her california had much better pot. her california lacked the crucial high school groupings of stoner, geek, jock, and later, preppie. her california also included a lot more parents than mine--in my memory, parents were pretty thin on the ground, and we liked it that way.

so i'm probably being unfair and appallingly narcissistic, in hoping that the book would recall to me my own experience.

the writing is very good, on the whole. there are some lovely scenes and turns of phrase. that the totality of the book seemed rather aimless, lacking a sort of central spine, might in all honesty be a fair recollection of the times.

but i still feel a vague disappointment with it. i had so hoped it would capture those times. unlike most of america (it seems), i most emphatically do not believe the 70s were a solipsistic waste of time, a decade spent gazing into one's bellybutton; i think the 70s produced some wonderful changes and led us to deeply question the purpose of our individual lives (questions very long overdue, i think).

so, three stars.

p.s. she did get the est-holes right. if you don't know what that means, you didn't live in california in the 70s :-)

Florinda says

Being of that vintage myself, I'm particularly drawn to stories about growing up during the 1970's, and in *The Ruins of California*, Martha Sherrill tells a fascinating - and as it turns out, highly autobiographical - one, having found that her proposed memoir about her father rang truer as a novel.

The title is a play on words, telling the story of the Ruin family during the years following the dislocating events of the 1960's when much of society itself seemed to be in ruins, and California's reputation for being the leading edge of rule-breaking loose living and general oddity was being honed. California itself plays an important role, in locations both real (the SF Bay area, Lagune Beach) and thinly disguised (suburban Van Dale=Glendale, moneyed, staid San Benito=San Marino, the bohemian, bucolic Ojala Valley=Ojai).

Inez Ruin is the child of what was then described as a "broken home," living with her mother Connie and immigrant grandmother in the LA suburb of Van Dale, but making regular visits to her brilliant, twice-divorced, mercurial father Paul in San Francisco and developing relationships with Paul's mother, wealthy San Benito widow Marguerite, and his son from his first marriage, Whitman, as she grows into her adolescence. The heart of the story is in Inez' relationships with these two men, though, and it is particularly a father-daughter story.

I loved the writing here. The story is told through Inez' first-person narration, and her voice is honest and convincing. The period descriptions and details sound and feel right. It's a growing-up story, which by its nature makes it more episodic than plot-driven, but it's the character development that really carries things along.

After the beginning, it feels like not much attention is given to Inez' relationship with her mother, and that bothered me until I sorted out that it's really not their story; following her divorce from Paul, Connie moved on from the Ruins, but Inez remains one, and so the focus here is on that side of her family - the not-everyday, complicated, come-and-go Ruins. Her grandmother Marguerite introduces her to horses and the rituals of a traditional county-club society that already seems to be out of date, but that isn't quite as fascinating as her laid-back half-brother Whitman's unrooted surfer lifestyle, and her father Paul overshadows them all. He's a contradictory combination of brilliance and interpersonal obtuseness, generosity and self-absorption, strongly attractive (and attracted) to women while never fully investing, art and technology, and parenting habits that swing between devoted and inappropriate. It's impressive that Inez comes through it all eventually with perspective and maturity, but there's no question that her father is an endlessly intriguing character - to her, as well as to the reader.

I took a liking to this book very quickly, and it didn't let me go. I found it to be an absorbing, relatively quick read; in fact, I wouldn't have minded if it were longer. The Ruins of California may not be the most lovable family I've ever met, but they're definitely among the more interesting ones.

Amy Jaspersen says

I just couldn't finish it. I wanted to like it (the cover looks super cool and drew me in) but I just can't finish it. I think there isn't enough of a plot to really keep me interested unfortunately. Not for me.

Donna Belcinski says

Didn't want it to end

Engrossing story; the prose is direct, uncluttered, and at times brilliantly insightful. Perfectly captures how it felt to grow up in the 1970s, even if you didn't live in California and learn to smoke pot with your father.

Ange H says

I found this book on the sale rack in the library with the word "discard" written across the title page in black sharpie.

The Ruins are an unconventional family in California in the 1970's. This would seem to be a rich and rewarding source of material, but it wasn't really very interesting. The many characters in the story - including the main one, teenaged Inez - are sketchily drawn, and there is really no plot to speak of. I think a book should have a plot, call me old fashioned. It had some interesting elements here and there, enough to finish it, but it would have been no great loss if I had heeded the handwritten message on the title page.

Monica Cooper says

Seriously trashy book. There are no redeeming or likable characters, the book drags and drags. Wish I hadn't wasted my time on this.

Kerri says

I'm not sure how I came about owning this book; it's not the sort I'd generally pick up. It must have been on sale somewhere; that's the only thing I can think. Since it's been gathering dust on my shelf for a while, and sitting dormant on my goodreads list, I figured it was time that I gave it a chance.

I braved through it, but I wasn't impressed. The main character, Inez, a girl from a split home with her boho father in the N. coast of California, and her suburban mother in the S. coast, was not like-able. She wasn't *unlikeable* per se; she was just dull (certainly not "precocious" as the synopsis states). The type of teenager I'd meet in real life and be thoroughly unimpressed with. So it was tough to find interest in her plotless life (and there was no plot). The book seems meant to be some sort of character study, however the main characters seemed the most undeveloped. Some of the peripheral characters were more intriguing than the ones I had to follow.

Overall, it was an easy book to get through, but I think it was helped by the fact that I'm CA born, so was always interested in the (clichéd) descriptions of the regions and their inhabitants. Somehow, by the end, I was drawn in enough to actually almost cry, but I can't quite explain how that came upon me, as the majority of the book was just so-so fr me.

Liz says

Inez Ruin is the protagonist of this book set in 1970's California, her parents are divorced. Her father lives a bohemian, playboy life in North Beach while her mother, a former flamenco dancer, lives a square, suburban life in Van Dale. Inez travels between southern California and northern California and balances between the two disparate lifestyles of her parents. Throw into the mix an intriguing half brother who's mother is British and lives in a commune, and a proper, cotillion advocating Grandmother; Inez's formative years are rich with varied experiences and viewpoints.

The title of the book is indicative of the tone of the book; as I read I felt that each of the characters described and the different groupings of family members were constantly on the brink of disaster or ruin. My prevailing thought was, "something terrible and irreversible is about to happen".

I love reading about California, love recognizing locations and attitudes. This book includes detailed snapshots of 1970's California down to what was on the tv schedule during a particular year.

I liked this book and would recommend it to anyone who enjoys reading about California in the 1970's and anyone who enjoys an exploration into the complexities of family relationships and growing up.

Judy Mann says

This book absolutely gave me the creeps. It's as if a sleepwalker is telling you this nothing special story. No ups, No downs, No nothing.

It's so flat it's creepy. Like who's actually ALIVE in this book? They're all in some lifeless trance-especially this Inez who's talking in this monotone right thru the story. I kept waiting for some huge climax- some fierce spark to set it all straight. But it just don't happen.

No I do not recommend it. At all. JM

Alia S says

When Whitman was stoned, he retreated, went inside himself. He grew silent and seemed almost sullen. Where had he gone? And when would he return? I hated how much he seemed to desire that separation from the world, and distance from me. I was lonely suddenly, even more than if I'd been walking in the woods by myself.

(That's how I feel, stoners. Come ba-aaack.)

First of all, the title: ugh, why. A pun is rarely good enough to carry a novel, a pun on a name is especially arbitrary, and Sherrill's editor and publisher should both be ashamed of themselves. If they had to go this route, why not simply "The Ruins"? Fifty percent less terrible and would have required no additional effort. Come on, guys.

Other than that, this book's fine. At least for a Californian reader with a bit of context, the description and contrast of Northern and Southern California in the '70s is vivid enough to compensate for 1) some slow pacing and 2) the fact that the characters are so atypical in their wealth and beauty that many people may not find them relatable. The narrator's conveniently magnetic man-child tech-savant father is rather recognizable these days, at least.

Unrelated observation I can't articulate properly: the narrator writes from the future without acknowledging retrospect at any point—like, this is clearly the voice of adult Inez Ruin, but she's pretending she's still 15? What do you call that variety of anachronism? Do you have an expensive M.A. in Creative Writing you've never gotten to use? Now's your chance; help me out!

Paul says

I picked this up on recent visit to San Francisco at City Lights bookstore. I recommend visiting the bookstore because of its collection, history, and neighborhood (near Chinatown), but I'm not enthused about Sherrill's book.

The staff at City Lights bookstore recommended it for people wanting to know about San Francisco in the

1970s. While it was flavored with descriptions of the neighborhoods my wife and I visited, there was little about the culture and feel of the city.

The story is a cliché style coming of age story about Inez Ruin; however, her father's growing up in his forties overshadows it. Her dad is a womanizing, shallow, charismatic guy who is shockingly honest with his daughter about sex, relationships, drug use, and marriage. His growth, or struggle, from self-centered asshole to a caring father is redeeming and believable.

It was hard for me to care for any of the characters, even the brother, who's a great brother but spoiled. And by the end, I was angered that Inez was receiving \$500 a month from her father while summering in Hawaii and complaining about being sad and apathetic from drug use. There's more of that type of stuff that was pathetic.

Overall, it wasn't terrible and helped me get through the plane ride back east.

Lucy says

I just can't get into it. Okay, that's not true. I got into it, and then the author did some squirrely things with her story that disinclined me to finish the book. I tried to keep trudging through, but it turns out it was a complete turn off.

What did me in was this: Inez's mother's family seems to exist solely to talk about the Ruins. Inez, apparently, has no relationship with her "Abuelita" except a sense of not-good-enoughness because her grandmother was so [woodenly] stoic and hardworking. Her Abuelita is described as cutting off cousins and sisters for small offenses and apparently only shows her love for her granddaughter by cooking hot cereal and the occasional bacon for breakfast. And her mother is pretty one-dimensional, too.

I tried to move past these annoyingly cardboard character descriptions back into the story, but it just seemed to get worse. Maybe it's like a bad relationship: once it starts falling apart, s/he just can't do anything right. Still, the "telling" instead of "showing" got the best of me, and I couldn't get past the lengthy paragraphs that take in whole stretches of time and character description as if to tell the reader "The mother exists solely because she has to," which is to say she might as well have just left the editor's note that said, "Insert mother character description here."

I can't even finish the book.

I gave it two stars because the author's style, other than the above-mentioned flaws, is pleasant and easy-flowing, so it was a nice read for the first 100 pages or so.

Erin Matzani says

I really enjoyed this book - I've actually read it twice!

Bethel says

Fun book. California in the 70's. A young girl grows up. Thanks ladies of the YDEHTGD Book Club

Jennifer says

I found this book in the City Lights bookstore in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. It had an employee write up saying that it was a great read for someone on vacation in the area - perfect for me. This is a coming of age story of a girl in the 1970's. Her mother lives in southern California and her father lives on Telegraph Hill in San Fran. Inez Ruin was someone I could easily relate to - we grew up in the same area although on different coasts but the traumas of the teen years are the same no matter where you live. The fact that I was reading about streets and neighborhoods that I was also visiting just added to the connection.

Inez's father is a major character in the book who seems to grow up as well throughout the story. The author does a good job of balancing his charm with his self-centeredness. Meanwhile her brother is defined as all charm and therefore a little more one-dimensional. Her mother just seems to disappear half way through the book but it wasn't until the end that I noticed she was missing. I think she would have only gotten in Inez's way.

The books main flaw is its ending - its all comes together a bit too easily as though the author was done writing and decided that she needed to just wrap it up. I noticed that some of the reviews complain that there is no plot but this story is about the way we all grow up with lots of stories with lots of little plots that all make us who we are as adults.
