



On the Shores of Darkness, There Is Light

Cordelia Strube

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From the acclaimed author of Lemon comes a clever and heartbreaking new novel of love and redemption

Harriet is 11 going on 30. Her mixed-media art is a source of wonder to her younger brother, Irwin, but an unmitigated horror to the panoply of insufficiently grown-up grown-ups who surround her. She plans to run away to Algonquin Park, hole up in a cabin like Tom Thomson and paint trees; and so, to fund her escape, she runs errands for the seniors who inhabit the Shangrila, the decrepit apartment building that houses her fractured family.

Determined, resourceful, and a little reckless, Harriet tries to navigate the clueless adults around her, dumpster dives for the flotsam and jetsam that fuels her art, and attempts to fathom her complicated feelings for Irwin, who suffers from hydrocephalus. On the other hand, Irwin's love for Harriet is not conflicted at all. She's his compass. But Irwin himself must untangle the web of the human heart.

Masterful and mordantly funny, Strube is at the top of her considerable form in this deliciously subversive story of love and redemption.

On the Shores of Darkness, There Is Light Details

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From Reader Review On the Shores of Darkness, There Is Light for online ebook

Emily Ferko says

My favourite book of perhaps all time.

Dorie - Traveling Sister :) says

NOW AVAILABLE AS AN AUDIOBOOK, FANTASTIC

This is another one of those books that I had to wait a few days before writing the review. It is so very astonishingly good in so many ways. From the first few paragraphs until the very end I was engaged in the story, in the characters, in the very constricting and oppressive lifestyle that Harriet had to live with.

Don't let the beginning of this novel, in which Harriet is funny, witty and precocious, fool you, this is a very serious, intuitive and brilliantly crafted story. This author has created characters that will definitely stay with you and are incredibly well developed.

Harriet, 11 years old, has had to live with a very dysfunctional family situation. She remembers back when it was just her and her parents, the trips, the everyday fun and loving that occurred, but all of that changed when her brother Irwin was born with hydrocephalus. Since birth and continuing to the present Irwin has needed constant care, many surgeries and trips to the ER. Harriet's father can't handle the situation and leaves.

When we meet Harriet she is living with her mother and Irwin, along with her mother's boyfriend, who is an equally inept parent and who stays at home while her mother works many hours to make enough money to keep the family going. Her father also has a new partner, equally flawed, and Harriet doesn't really have any solid, loving parental support. She has a great group of seniors in the apartment complex whom she does small tasks for, in her mind she is saving money to go away and live alone on the shores of a lake that she loves. Some of these seniors offer her more support and affection than her own parents.

There is really nothing to prepare you for the strength of this story. This is a very rare book that manages to be lighthearted in some places and make you laugh out loud while covering some very heavy material. How a disabled family member changes the entire focus of the family, how desperate a child can become when she is floating free with no love and protection to anchor her.

I would recommend this book to absolutely everyone and I will look for more books by this brilliant writer. I would give this book a 10 if I could, it's that good.

I received an ARC of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Esil says

It seems like a special skill to be able to write a book that is both funny and achingly sad at the same time. At

times, I couldn't quite figure out whether *On the Shores of Darkness, There is Light* was satire, comedy or tragedy. But in the end it doesn't really matter, because it's just a really good and compelling read. It made me laugh out loud, and it made me horribly sad. The first half is told from Harriet's perspective. She is 11 years old -- her 6 year old brother Irwin was born prematurely with many health complications, she lives with her mother and mother's boyfriend, and she lives in an apartment building called the Shangrila in Toronto full of interesting characters. The second half is told from Irwin's perspective a few years later when he is 14 years old. Harriet is the kind of kid who is bright and insightful beyond her years, but has a knack for saying things that drive adults crazy. Irwin is starved for love, and is bewildered by the adult world he lives in. I won't say more about the plot to avoid revealing a spoiler of seismic dimensions. But apart from that event, this novel is more about character and feeling than anything else. Both Harriet and Irwin are insightful and funny; but as I laughed I ached over what had me laughing-- about the cringe making actions and decisions of Harriet and Irwin's somewhat well meaning, but mostly self-centered hapless parents and step parents. At times, the plot feels a little chaotic and meandering, but it always comes back into sharp focus at some pretty key moments. And I would be remiss if I didn't mention the key role played by the elderly residents of the Shangrila -- they resonate like a Greek chorus, freely offering their observations to Harriet and Irwin. The fact that this book has us seeing through the eyes of a child and young teenager doesn't make it cute; rather it gives a great perspective on some of the absurdities and struggles of adult life, and the harsh impact the choices and struggles of adults have on their kids. And a bonus for me is that this book is set in Toronto -- it made for a very recognizable great setting. Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an ARC.

Pia says

When I started reading this book I wasn't sure if I was going to like it. I had read several reviews that raved about it, but for me it was a slow start. I wasn't sure about any of the main characters: Harriet, her mother, her father, her brother, the seniors...

But there was something that made me keep on, and I'm grateful I did.

Harriet is 11 years old. She lives with her mother, her "stepfather" and her little brother, who is ill. All around her are adults that deep down are more immature than she is. They share too much information with her and don't realize she is only a little girl that needs love and comfort. And hugs!

She lives in apartment building full of seniors, and only one girl her age (who is a horrible character in the beginning), she makes very dark art out of dumpsters and she takes care of everybody. But who takes care of her? Maybe her grandmother, who is one step away from having Alzheimer's.

But the book takes a major twist and what happens first is not what we see in the end.

I have seldom seen such a beautiful book with so many unlikeable characters. Harriet is a very complex little girl, and her brother Irwin is on the top of my list.

And what about the title? Isn't it amazing?

But be warned, this isn't an easy book. I wanted to scream at each and every one of the adults (if they can be called that) that appear here. And even if there was not much hope for Harriet, there is a light for Irwin and Heike.

I received an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Angela M says

What makes this incredibly sad story bearable is that at times it is incredibly funny. What makes reading about the unbelievable irresponsibility of Harriet and Irwin's parents bearable is that they are beside these children, who are the light of this story and who had my heart from the beginning. The moments when I laughed mostly were at the comings and goings of the senior community at the Shangrila apartment building where Harriet and her brother Irwin live with their oblivious mother (maybe well meaning and loves her children but still oblivious) and her mean spirited, insecure boyfriend. Their deadbeat, bike riding father who is self centered is around some of the time, but he is also oblivious. Together, these people allow Harriet to bear the burden of their failing as parents.

It's hard not to fall for eleven year old Harriet. Oh sure she has a potty mouth sometimes, talks back to her elders and even wishes that her younger brother Irwin, who has suffered from illness since birth, wasn't alive but we know that's really not true. A much too stressful little life she leads at eleven, Harriet sometimes thinks she has heart trouble.

"Ever since Gran's bypass operation, Harriet's had heart trouble, particularly when she's trying to sleep. She has to calm her heart, talk to it like one of the seniors, or it will leap out of her. Sometimes she feels it stop and has to jump around to get it moving again. She doesn't trust her heart."

"She doesn't hate him, not all the time anyway. When he can't sleep and lies with his head on her chest, listening to her heartbeat, she doesn't hate him. Ever since he was a baby Harriet's heartbeat has put him to sleep. She lies very still, not wanting to disturb him, feeling his heart beating much faster than hers. She doesn't have heart trouble when Irwin falls asleep on her chest."

It's hard not to fall for Irwin either and as a reader I immediately knew that it would be the children in this novel that carry the story on their backs. My heart was broken for Harriet and then again for Irwin in the second part of the book as he agonizes over things that happened. I can think of a few other novels that made me feel this way *Boo*, and *Aquarium* and *A Land More Kind Than Home*, all about devastating things happening to children in some way. I'm partial to the point of view of young characters because so many times they are so much wiser than the adults around them and this was true for me with Harriet at eleven and Irwin in the second part of the book eight years later at fourteen. It's more than difficult for me to talk about the devastating thing that happens here so I won't - not even with spoiler tags. Suffice it to say that for me what sometimes makes the difference between a 4 and a 5 star review is knowing that I won't or rather cannot forget the characters. 5 stars without a doubt.

I'm grateful to ECW Press for a copy of this book.

Ann Marie (Lit·Wit·Wine·Dine) says

This is one of the BEST books I have read in a very long time! I'm going to put it out there and say I believe this book will really put Cordelia Strube, who I was previously unfamiliar with, on the map in a BIG way. She certainly deserves any awards, accolades, screenplays, etc. that come her way as a result of writing this beautiful and meaningful book. I should stop gushing now. I rarely gush but I'm admittedly restraining myself even after that uncharacteristic outburst.

On the Shores of Darkness, There is Light is actually a very difficult book for me to give a thorough review

to without adding spoilers but I don't want to give even a hint away. It's that good, original, and unexpected.

Harriet, our young heroine, is wise beyond her years. She's smart and sarcastic, loving and spiteful, hardened and innocent. She's had to deal with her parents divorce, her brother's chronic illness, and her parent's layabout, no-goodnick, and so-called intellectual less than ideal new partners, and social isolation because she's just not your average eleven year old. She's also quite enterprising and is amassing a small but respectable secret cache of (escape) money by tending to the needs of the elderly men and women that live in her apartment building. We learn so much about these characters I really found myself growing attached to most of them. Each of these characters came with their own little stories and I really enjoyed the way their lives and stories were perfectly woven into those of our main characters.

As for her brother, Irwin, I loved him more with each turn of the page. As I watched him grow from young boy to adolescence, I was increasingly awed by the author's ability to portray the characters in such a way that's so believable and honest.

This is one of those rare books that works much humor and lightheartedness into some really heavy subject matter in a completely appropriate and realistic way. Bravo, Cordelia Strube! I'm already looking forward to reading your next book.

Thanks to ECW press via NetGalley for proving me with a free e-galley in exchange for an honest review.

www.litwitwineanddine.com

Stella Wenny says

I requested the ARC of this book from netgalley because of the gorgeous title and cover. And I didn't regret it at all. Reading this book is a great experience. At first, I was wary about this because it contains some profanity and there seems no decency in the life of the characters. All the characters don't seem likable too. But it gets better, way much better. I understand why Harriet hated her life and wanted to escape. I understand why Irwin can't move on after what happened with Harriet. I even understand Lynne's position. And I really wish I could be much better parent than all parents in this book.

I learned this: Suffering a hard life gradually changes people, bit by bit, it always does. At first you think you can still bear their changes, but you wake up one day and suddenly there are too many things on them that irritate you. So your attitude toward this person becomes bad, and because they feel like you don't respect them, they become even more irritating. The only way to fix that is by telling this person the truth, why you don't like some of the things they do, and also letting them know that you're willing to change your attitude too. Don't show hate. If they can see you change, and feel loved, I believe they will gradually change to be good again. I totally learned a lot about children and parents relationship from this book :)

Cynthia Corral says

Well, this book was fantastic.

It stars Harriet, an amazing little eleven year old who is tough as nails on the outside but sensitive and artsy on the inside. Also starring her brother Irwin, who suffers from hydrocephalus and is unable to do most

anything that Harriet can. Irwin loves and idolizes his big sister, but Harriet's life changed dramatically when Irwin was born so she has a very intense love-hate relationship with him.

Their parents, who are woefully unable to cope with the precocious, gloomy Harriet and sick Irwin, have divorced, and each have new partners who are similarly flawed. All the parents and pseudo-parents in this book are terribly inept at filling the roles their children need from them. Irwin is showered with love and attention by his mother and her boyfriend, while Harriet is ignored and left to her own devices. On the other hand, their father is willing to spend time with Harriet, but is unable to cope with his sick son.

Their world of broken homes and revolving parental figures is shared with friends from similarly broken homes, and a slew of low-income seniors who populate their building and offer up better advice than the parents ever could.

How do either of them cope with the obstacles Life has thrown them? Will either of them be able to survive their own drastically different, shared yet individual worlds? Is Harriet truly the strong one and Irwin the weak?

The story takes a very unexpected, emotional turn (and yet a very likely outcome, looking back afterward) about 60% through. And then again as the book comes to an end you know what is going to happen in those last few pages - I swore it wasn't going to get to me... and yet, there it was, the last page, the resolution, the beautiful beautiful ending... Yes, it got to me.

Diane S ? says

I am not going to rehash the plot, the book description is a good start. Harriet is a very original character, a self sufficient young lady whose observations of those around her are vastly amusing. She sees and thinks things most people do not and her crude language will make many a parent cringe. They live in Sangrida apartments, a low income place with single moms, or moms with rotters for husbands and a large assortment of senior citizens. Many characters, all we come to know in the course of the book, and some of them had me in stitches.

So life goes on, until it doesn't. While reading this I couldn't help wondering where this book was going but I was thoroughly shocked at the direction it took. Ten years later, and some of the characters are going on, some have left us and some are barely coping. This is written in a very amusing manner but there are many serious issues at play. There are layers upon layers and characters that are so very real, as are the issues they have to deal with.

A book that is not getting the attention it deserves in my opinion and I thank Elyse for bringing it to my attention. Finished this yesterday and have thought about it on and off all day. These characters will not leave you easily. A very good observation on how children view our actions, even when they make sense to us. A very good and well written read, a book that should have a huge impact on its readers.

ARC from Netgalley.

TamElaine says

Thank you Angela for you recommendation !

Characterization in this story is outstanding ! The author takes you into the mind of an 11-year old shaped by the chaotic misdirected minds of her parents and those around her.... proof that those who appear tough and prickly and who don't reach out in a straight-forward manner are the ones that need the most love, guidance, direction. Harriet and her situation made my heart ache....drew out that 'rescuer' part of me that I suppose will never go away and made me hurt deep down - made me want to take her out of the pages and hold her, nurture her love for art; made me want to offer support and direction for Lynne to get her head on straight and help her to see what I know she saw, but was stuffing; made me want to "slap" Gennedy and see if he still thought a slap was okay - essentially, this book brought out the best and the worst in me. Many books can draw emotion from me, but this one made me want to act out of my emotion. Harriet and her family were so real to me...as was Darcy and Buck.

Thank goodness for the seniors living in Shangrila that added some humour, and some break away from the tragedy that was Harriet's life....

This book, to me, was a deep study in characterization, and I believe Cordelia Strube nailed it !

Great book for discussion - although I feel so vested, I'm not sure I'd want to be involved in the discussion - one I think could get pretty heated....

I need to go shake this one off - I love a book that can make me feel that strongly

Erica says

2.5 stars rounded up without enthusiasm.

While I liked the book well enough, I did get bored and I didn't understand why there were two parts, Harriet's story and Irwin's story.

Harriet is an interesting character, both bratty and needy, free-spirited and frustrated. She's 11, an artist...she's a Judy Blume character with much rougher edges. She's a little adult who is a little crazy because she's really just a kid but she needs so much more than kids need and no one understands that, not her distracted mother, busy taking care of her youngest child, not her mother's jealous boyfriend who would prefer Harriet be seen and not heard, not her own father nor her father's GwynethPaltrowy wife who is expecting a girlchild, herself. Not even her best frenemy, another lonely soul of a girl who has so many needs and so few outlets. Art is the only thing that calms Harriet but her pieces are hideous and horrifying to everyone who lays eyes upon them.

Everyone but Irwin.

Irwin is sick, fragile, always in the hospital. His mother fears for his life, devoting herself to him and inadvertently abandoning her daughter. He doesn't really know his father who, even if he weren't so afraid of Irwin's faint tether on life, can't be bothered to care for his son while he expects a new baby from his new wife. But Irwin loves Harriet, he loves her more than anyone else in his circle of acquaintances. Harriet both loves Irwin back and despises him, wishes he would just die already so he could quit hovering on the brink of life, quit being in agony, quit living in the hospital, and quit taking all of their mother's time and effort. Irwin doesn't know this, he just knows Harriet is the best and that her art is beautiful.

I really liked the last few pages, though I felt it would have meant more had this been all Irwin's story, from the outset, about how he related to his two sisters.

Elyse Walters says

Tomorrow the bird gets stuffed. People all over the United States are *stuffing-the-bird*.

Me: I'm stuffed nowover-flowing with STUFF-LAUGHTER....so move-over,

Jonathan Tropper...(favorite comic/tragic funny man), 'The Tropper', has met his MATCH!

Cordelia Stube, (new author to me)....is THE BEST FEMALE comic/tragedy author I have EVER had the pleasure to read!!! Hot Damn! I honestly have not laughed this hard in a book 'since' reading Jonathan Tropper or ...maybe since reading "Hope A Tragedy", by Shalom Auslander.

It takes a special talent to write these types of books - and do them well. Twisty comedy with dark themes about contemporary modern life. Sentence after sentence ...I loved every word of the sarcasm, and cynicism, the inpolitically correct remarks. Cordelia Stube' s talent (besides creating 'awesome' memorable characters and juicy satisfying dialogue), is her right 'mix' of thoughtfulness, nonsense, and humor.

Harriet just might be the greatest 11 year old female character to hit the books in decades! In the way that I fell in love with Lisbeth Salander, (Dragon Tattoo Trilogy), one of the most fresh and compelling female young adults...(with her photographic memory, brilliant computer programming skills, and her superlative fighting skills),

is that same 'feeling' of excitement I have for HARRIET. She's my new young hero. The relationships between she and her mom - her mom's boyfriend - her dad - her dad's girlfriend - her little brother who was born with serious medical problems-her grandmother- her friends- the senior citizens -her artwork -her escape plan ... is like a seal bouncing a ball on the tip of its nose.

Harriet - somehow keeps the ball rolling in a crazy - nutty - disjointed family & community. SHE ROCKS! The supporting cast is wonderful too... (I'm telling you - a few - to - die- laughing scenes!!!)

Here is an example of the way Harriet's mind thinks ... (quick, honest, witty, adorable): "Harriet suspects the adults have discussed how she lacks compassion, is uncooperative and mistreated Uma. The adults go through the motions of asking her what happened but they already made up their minds"

"Harriet, why is it that whenever I ask you about what happened at school or camp, or anywhere in fact, you tell me 'nothing'. How would you feel if every time you asked me what happened during my day, I said 'nothing'?"

"I never ask you what happened during the day"

I could pull page after page of very funny scenesa variety of dynamics play out.

It would spoil too much to dish out the really funny parts ...but there are many throughout the book.

Simultaneously, this novel is bittersweet. It's exceptionally well written with great character development and emotion. Like pumping iron...you feel 'buffed' by the experience!

It's soooooooooo GOOD!!!!!! I'd enjoy seeing this book as a stage play ... a movie ...

and ... I'll definitely read at least parts of this book again soon! My funny bone got a great shot of SATISFACTION!!!!!! SIGN ME UP FOR MORE Cordelia Strube books to read!!!

5++++ stars!!!

Thank You ECW Press, Netgalley, and Cordelia Strube.... (love you)

Barbara Rohde says

What happens when your family life is disrupted by a child with a chronic condition? Harriet is 4 years old when her brother Irwin is born with hydrocephalus which gives him a large head and frequent seizures. The impact of the illness splits the family and we come to meet Harriet when she is 11 years old. Harriet has had to learn to be very independent as her mother's attention is always on Irwin with frequent hospital stays. Harriet is very smart and speaks bluntly confounding the adults around her. But she hatches a plan to escape her life and the frustrating people in it. Told from both Harriet's and Irwin's points of view, this is a wonderfully poignant tale exploring a host of issues with well-rounded characters that have you laughing out loud one minute and weeping the next. The doctors felt Irwin should be left to die but Harriet's mother, Lynne sacrificed everything to give him a life. But what was the cost? I loved the way this tale unfolded and the unexpected outcomes. It's both hilarious and tragic at the same time - a feat difficult to achieve unless you have constructed believable characters and situations. Disability is explored in depth from several different angles which gives the novel its complexity while remaining a riveting read. A novel not to miss.

Karen says

I really enjoyed this book which was both sad and hilarious at times. The story is about an 11 yr old girl Harriet and her developmentally challenged younger brother Irwin. I just loved Harriet and her spunk and how she got on with the seniors in the apartment building in which her family lived.

Cheri says

Harriet may technically be considered a child in terms of years at the age of 11, but she is well beyond her years when you count her disappointments in life, in her parents and in some of her neighboring senior citizens. Harriet's savvier than average, knows how to read people pretty well, and has her own little money making enterprise going on. Maybe a little conniving with her senior citizen neighbors, but no more than the seniors trying to get her to help them all the time for free. Time is money, after all, and Harriet has a plan for the money she's making. She's a budding artist, with a bit of darkness in her art, but Harriet is not typical in any way so why would you expect her art to be full of rainbows and unicorns? She's sassy and cynical, a little spiteful and resourceful. You can't help but love her.

On the slightly less than lovable list is the father's new wife, Uma, an intellectual, who prefers her computer to human contact with Harriet, her father, who prefers bicycling with friends to time with his children. Then there's Gennedy, her mother's live-in, a lawyer who never manages to make any money who is fighting for the top spot for the list. And there's Irwin. Harriet's little brother, born with medical complications leaving him with multiple health problems. Who has time for Harriet? Well, no one.

Irwin is sweet, adores his big sister Harriet, sleeps on her with his ear to her chest from the time he is little. While Harriet resents that Irwin gets all of her parents' attention, she has a soft spot in her heart for Irwin that only grows bigger.

Even the senior citizens in their building are people you will know and love, always offering Harriet their advice, telling her their stories.

As in life, the sweet is mixed with sadness. Cordelia Strube (who is a new author to me) has written a wonderful book that will run you through every emotion and leave you so glad that you read “On the Shores of Darkness.”

Thanks to ECW press, to NetGalley and to the author, Cordelia Strube.
