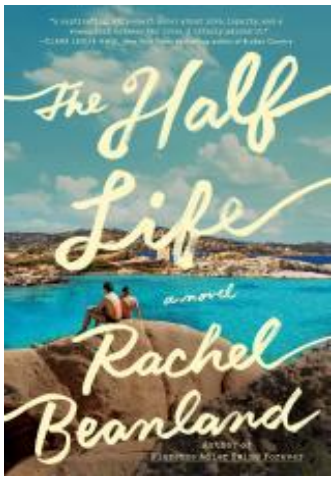
The Half Life

by Rachel Beanland



About the Book

From the author of FLORENCE ADLER SWIMS FOREVER and THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE, a novel set on a remote Italian island about a navy wife?s reckoning with power, love and the price of staying silent in the Atomic Age.

When 23-year-old Eileen O?Malley meets charismatic naval officer Paul Archer in a Charleston department store, she doesn?t expect to fall so hard, so fast. But Paul is funny and ambitious, and Eileen soon has a ring on her finger and is following him to the tiny, sun-drenched Mediterranean island of La Maddalena, where Paul will be heading up Radiological Controls aboard a submarine tender.

In La Maddalena, Eileen joins a makeshift community of navy wives who are hell-bent on making the island feel a little more like home. But for Eileen, whose brother died in Vietnam, *home* is a loaded word, and as she settles into life on the island --- taking Italian lessons and learning to make *culurgiones* --- she begins to love the place for all the ways it is not like where she comes from.

Still, it doesn?t take long for Eileen to be confronted with the complexities of being an American abroad. The decision to send nuclear-powered subs into the La Maddalena Archipelago was a contentious one, and the U.S. government is doing whatever it can to ensure that the island --- not to mention all of Italy --- doesn?t go communist in the next election.

When Italian activists and scientists begin to sound the alarm about possible nuclear contamination in the water, the island erupts in a series of protests, made worse by the ongoing mishaps of the U.S. Navy. Soon, Eileen?s marriage falters and her loyalties begin to shift as she is drawn into a web of secrets --- and to a local journalist who forces her to imagine a life beyond the one she?s been handed.

Atmospheric, sexy and quietly defiant, THE HALF LIFE is a story of love, complicity and awakening --- of one woman

forced to choose between loyalty to her husband and country and to the Italian locals who show her the high cost of American exceptionalism.

Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of the novel, what do you think draws Eileen to Paul? Did your understanding of their relationship change as the story unfolded?

2. What does Eileen gain by becoming part of the Navy community, and what does she lose by belonging to it?

3. How does the Mediterranean landscape of La Maddelena impact the mood of the novel?

4. Throughout the entirety of the story, Eileen is haunted by her brother Lenny's death in combat. How does this grief shape the way she makes choices, both in Charleston and once she arrives on the island?

5. What did you think about Eileen?s friendship with Laura? Would they have been friends had the Navy not brought them together? And were there moments when you judged or condemned their differences in character?

6. Discuss the moral choices Eileen faces, both in her public and private life. At what point does knowing the truth create a responsibility to act?

7. What role does language --- through Italian lessons, translation and misunderstandings --- play in the novel?

8. Do you think Eileen?s attraction to Teo is primarily romantic, political, intellectual or symbolic of her desire for another life?

9. How do you think Rachel Beanland would define loyalty? Should loyalty belong primarily to a spouse, a community or a country --- or can it fluctuate?

10. The novel raises questions around the roles --- wife, mother, Navy spouse --- women are expected to play in different spheres. How do these expectations shape the choices available to the women in the novel?

11. Discuss the title THE HALF LIFE. How does the scientific definition of a ?half-life? relate to the novel?s bigger ideas surrounding marriage, secrets, grief and memory?

12. Throughout the novel, Eileen periodically addresses a ?you,? but the addressee isn?t revealed until the epilogue. How does knowing to whom Eileen is writing change how you interpreted the narrative, and what does it add to the novel?

Author Bio

Rachel Beanland is the author of THE HALF LIFE, THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE and FLORENCE ADLER SWIMS FOREVER, which won the National Jewish Book Award for Debut Fiction. She is a graduate of the University of South

Carolina and earned her MFA in creative writing from Virginia Commonwealth University. She lives with her family in Richmond, Virginia.

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