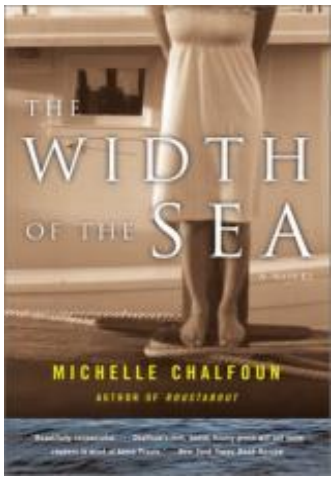
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The Width of the Sea: A Novel

by Michelle Chalfoun



About the Book

In **The Width of the Sea**, two intertwined families, the Fitzes and the Albins, struggle to survive on the Maine coast despite a dying fishing industry. At the seaport town of Rosaline, the sea may be wide, but it is now almost empty. Fishing boats known as "draggers" have long since scraped the ocean bottom clean "like so many hands to so many mouths."

Prospects are bleak. The processing plant has closed, fishing restrictions are on the increase, and the government is offering a 'buyback package' -- offering to pay fishermen to scuttle their boats and quit.

The elder Fitz, Warren, owns the fishing boat Pearl, and he has spent all his life either at sea or in the town bar. Fishing "kept him from dying of drink, and drinking kept him from dying of boredom." So attuned is he to his boat and the weight of his fishing net, he swears he can feel its drag. He would know a good catch by the "strain on the warps, a hum on the cables, a certain heaviness in his guts."

Warren's son John Fitz is angry with the old men for having taken all the fish, but befuddled by the realization that he "would have fished the same, if he'd been born thirty years earlier." He crews on the Pearl, along with his life-long friend Chris Albin, a drug addict.

John's high school sweetheart is Yve Albin, who also happens to be Chris's sister. Almost 30 and still living with her parents, she worries that the chance to marry and to have a child is drying up like the fishing industry, that she's at the end of everything - "living in the last little bit after the end. Like ? that blue dot on the TV after you turn off the set, that small blip."

Chris Albin is married to a restless Kate, who tends bar at the town's gathering spot, the Whiskey Wind. Their young son Martin drifts between his grandparents and aunt Yve.

Some townspeople, Citizens Associated for Restorative Projects (CARP), look for ways to attract tourists and "yachties." They run a museum and a children's discovery center, where one exhibit is about Carp, a freshwater fish strangely unrelated to the town's history. Antagonizing the fishermen, CARP forces fishing boats off the town pier to make room for a tourist attraction, the restored 1902 schooner Shardon Rose.

With no option but to take the government buyback, Chris persuades John to sail the Pearl to Miquelon, off the coast of Newfoundland, and to run drugs back to the United States. Desperate and inexperienced, these young Maine fishermen initiate an astounding train of events for Rosaline and for the Fitzes and the Albins.

Discussion Guide

1. In **The Width of the Sea**, the author writes about people grappling with survival in the face of a dying industry. Do they have choices? Who is able to find alternatives to fishing and who is not? Are the alternatives realistic?

2. In your opinion, how realistic is the portrayal of a diminishing resource? Are there constructive things that can be done?

3. Can you characterize the family relationship of Chris, Kate, and Martin? What are the dynamics and how did they arise?

4. The author gives a lot of information about the fishing life. What did you find of interest and what surprised you?

5. John describes a dilemma that appears to have no way out. He says that "what is wrong started going wrong a long time ago, and now the only answer is to stop." Then he says he won't stop. Can you relate John's dilemma to his character? To his actions?

6. Dan says "we used to be like cowboys. ?That kind of respect." Is respect a reason why the different characters hold on to a dying occupation? What are some of the other reasons? How is it possible for people to move from traditional work to new work?

7. Yve imagines "John's thoughts to be a simple list of observations; tree, moon, leaves, knee," and John thinks that Yve can "force him to take his finest ideas - and mash them into ugly clumsy words too thick for anyone to credit." How would you analyze the verbal communication between the two? Is it important?

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship between John and Yve? Do you think it will endure?

9. John and Chris are initially on opposite sides over the question of whether to transport drugs. What are their arguments? Why does Chris prevail and not John?

10. Yve suspects "that most men think empirically. ?Numbers and treasures and money. Weather and repairs. Things that to her seem without emotion. Cold things. Metallic things." Do the men and women in this novel think about the

same or different things? Do they think differently about the same thing?

11. Is the "sense of place" an important part of this novel? Can you point to passages that make the seacoast, the community, or the fishing life especially real for you?

Author Bio

Michelle Chalfoun has worked in the circus as a roustabout, on boats as a deckhand and cook, and in shipyards as maintenance and repair crew. She divides her time between New England and the Puget Sound.

Critical Praise

"Beautifully suspenseful . . . Chalfoun's rich, dense, knotty prose will put some readers in mind of Annie Proulx."

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