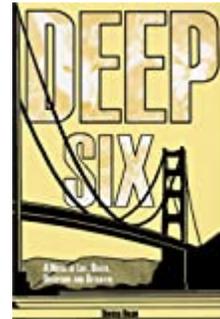




Donna M. Dean. *Deep Six: A Novel of Life, Death, Deception, and Betrayal.* Palo Alto: Palo Alto Press, 2001. 208 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-889901-19-0.



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Great Characters, Weak Story

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Deep Six is a novel that unfolds during the late 1940's in Marin City, California. It follows the course of a friendship developed between two people who would seem unlikely to ever become friends at all: Tondelayo Cecile Dubois, "one of the Indians, with a little Negro mixed in from the Cajun and Burnt-Sugar Cherokee both," (p. 4) and Barbara Nadine Johnson, just "another poor white trash kid" (p. 2).

Their friendship begins in childhood. Narrator Tondelayo lives with her hardworking parents and older brother, Jack. Barbara Nadine is a hardened kid, the offspring of the union between a mean drunk and a beaten-down woman who "always seem[ed] to produce more tow-headed, snotty-nosed babies" (p. 3). To escape her wretched family, Barbara spends most of her hours at the Dubois' home, but one day she reveals to Tondelayo that her father had been sexually abusing her for years, "since she was a baby" (p. 168). The Dubois, outraged, confront Barbara Nadine's mother, and Barbara Nadine is allowed to join the Dubois' household permanently.

The first third of the novel, written in a style reminiscent of a memoir, dwells on Tondelayo and Barbara growing up "in Marin City's bumpy way" (p. 13). During these years, the girls often escape their squalid neighborhood to play in the "fairytale land of the hills above Marin City" (p. 7). As the girls grow older, they admire Tondelayo's older brother, Jack, who is a biker in a gang called the Copperheads. By their teens, the girls are dabbling in the hoodlum biker lifestyle themselves, though they merely hang at the fringes, developing "big brother" relationships with the other gang members, particularly with Jack's best friend, Napa Bob. Then the Korean War kicks off and Jack is drafted into the Navy and Napa Bob into the Army's Special Forces. Soon thereafter Jack is killed when his ship goes down, and Napa Bob, damaged from his combat experiences, becomes an emotional stranger.

Despite their rough formative years, the girls make a bold decision: they are going to join the Navy together after high school. "We wanted to end up differently than so many of the girls in Marin City," Tondelayo tells us. "Not for us the big bellies and eternal tiredness of our friends who were in such a hurry to marry

or have babies....We were determined to make real lives for ourselves” (p. 73). Despite slight misgivings from the Duboises, the girls enter boot camp and become WAVES.

After boot camp and follow-on training, both women report to their duty stations, “[j]ust across the bay from home!” (p. 77)—Tondelayo to Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Alameda and Barbara Nadine to the Twelfth Naval District at Treasure Island. Together, they room in the barracks, earn their Petty Officer chevrons in record time, and experience the shock of seeing the first casualties from the Vietnam War trickle in.

Here, midpoint in the novel, the plot takes a sudden and jarring shift: Barbara Nadine is found dead in the duty room, locked from the inside, with no evidence of foul play. Investigators from the Navy’s Judge Advocate General determine the cause of death to be accidental, possibly due to a bee sting, because a handful of dead bees were found in the room with the body. Barbara Nadine’s autopsy reveals two facts: that her body showed symptoms of anaphylactic shock consistent with an extreme allergic reaction, and that she was two months pregnant. When Tondelayo discovers this, she is immediately suspicious; she insists there is no way Barbara Nadine could be pregnant. Because of the molestation she experienced as a child, Tondelayo tells us that Barbara Nadine was “scared to death of sex....She didn’t want no part in it” (p. 144). In fact, Barbara Nadine would only date if she were doubling with Tondelayo. Additionally, Tondelayo reveals that both she and Barbara Nadine would never have risked the chance of getting pregnant because they were ambitious and wanted to succeed in the Navy. And most significant, if Barbara Nadine had found out she was pregnant, she most certainly would have told Tondelayo; they were best friends, closer than sisters. Based on those facts, Tondelayo comes to the audacious conclusion: “Barbara Nadine hadn’t gotten pregnant voluntarily. She must have been raped” (p. 149).

Not only is Tondelayo convinced that Barbara Nadine had been raped, but because she cannot recall Barbara Nadine ever having an allergic reaction to a bee sting, she strongly suspects that her death was no accident; she was murdered. Dissatisfied with Navy JAG’s conclusions, Tondelayo launches her own secret investigation. She enlists help from a variety of people to include her black female boss, Lieutenant Monroe, and Barbara Nadine’s supervisor, Master Chief Manns, a greatly respected man with many important connections at his disposal.

“Things appeared on my desk like magic” (p. 151),

Tondelayo tells us, and indeed they do, conveniently for the plot. Through a series of fortuitous discoveries, she finds out that a month before Barbara Nadine’s death, Commander Strang, Barbara Nadine’s creepy Executive Officer, was the Command Duty Officer (CDO) on the same night that Barbara Nadine was on watch duty. Later, Tondelayo just so happens to recall that Barbara Nadine once had an extreme allergic reaction to some Filipino Food she’d eaten at a picnic. The antihistamine shot she received as treatment knocked her out. The CDO that night “saw her back” to her barracks room. That CDO turned out to be Commander Strang. Soon after that conveniently placed recollection, Tondelayo is having a conversation with her longtime friend Napa Bob and learns that, coincidentally, he remembered Strang from Vietnam. While serving as a Special Forces advisor there, Strang, it seems, had operated a number of side businesses, to include using body bags to run drugs through Laos and Vietnam, blackmarketing orphaned children to pimps in Thailand and Saigon, and selling hacked off body parts of dead Vietnamese as souvenirs. Armed with this information, Tondelayo has no doubt that this Commander Strang was the one who first raped and impregnated Barbara Nadine and, weeks later, murdered her. Tondelayo conjectures that Strang murdered Barbara Nadine with peanut oil, which he somehow determined had caused the first allergic reaction. Strang had used that reaction to his advantage for his sexual gratification; Tondelayo believes he orchestrated a second deadly reaction to keep Barbara Nadine from ever remembering the rape. The sole missing piece to the puzzle which Tondelayo can’t figure out is how Strang was able to expose Barbara Nadine to enough peanut oil to kill her.

While Tondelayo is hot on the trail of Commander Strang, the Naval Investigative Service Office (NISO) is hot on hers. According to Tondelayo, all Navy women live in fear of the powerful NISO because of the lesbian witch hunts it conducts, often leading innocent women to crack and tragically commit suicide under the intense pressure. “The Navy brass was convinced that all military women were either whores or dykes, and were death on women who were friends” (p. 82), Tondelayo tells us. Accordingly, one particularly slimy (and heavily stereotyped) investigator, Agent Smithers, hauls Tondelayo in day after day to interrogate her about what he perceives to be an “unnaturally close” relationship between the two childhood friends, Tondelayo and the deceased Barbara Nadine. Smithers’ ultimate objective is clear: to force Tondelayo out of the Navy or make her

give up her investigation of Strang, but she tenaciously persists. Meanwhile, the missing piece snaps in place through yet another combination of conveniently placed circumstances and baseless assumptions. But too late—Commander Strang resigns his commission and retires from the Navy.

Throughout the novel, Dean struggles with consistency, both with voice and plot development. She uses proper English at times; at others, she slips into a heavy dialect of slang and “salty sailor” profanity. Occasionally, she lapses into a sort of omniscient point of view through the eyes of a mythical She Coyote who prowls the hills above Marin City where the neighborhood children play. Often, the narration reads much like a memoir with anecdotal rabbit trails seldom tying back into the plot.

Unfortunately, Dean never decided which direction she wanted to take this novel. The first third of the book, chronicling the close relationship between Tondelayo and Barbara Nadine, could have developed into a compelling coming-of-age novel. Dean obviously draws on her own childhood experience in Marin City, and much of this is poignantly depicted, allowing readers to feel like they, too, had spent much of their childhood

playing in the hills above Marin City.

But then, the plot shifts, placing the Navy as the backdrop for the remainder of the novel. As a younger veteran myself, I’ve always been interested in this period of women’s military history. I wanted to see how Dean treated the WAVE experience, yet I was disappointed to find that she devoted one mere paragraph to Tondelayo and Barbara Nadine’s ten week boot camp, after which they were miraculously transformed into, “by God, sailors. Squared away, and standing tall” (p. 77). Dean dedicated no space to their follow-on training or acclimation to the military lifestyle. Instead, she immediately plunged into the murder mystery. This portion of the book is the least convincing. Dean displays a lack of knowledge about the military justice system and its investigative procedures and fails to drop essential clues pointing to the murderer throughout the book. Rather, she relies upon stereotypes, conveniently placed memories, and poorly connected circumstances.

In *Deep Six*, author Donna Dean creates many compelling characters, ones who stay with the reader long after the book is finished. Unfortunately, it lacks the satisfying storyline to match.

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