



A Certain Slant of Light

Cynthia Thayer

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At the heart of Cynthia Thayer's debut novel, *Strong for Potatoes*, was the tender relationship between a girl and her grandfather, constantly evolving as their lives grew and changed. Now, in Thayer's second novel, she tackles another kind of relationship, one between strangers.

Peter lost his wife and children in a fire years ago, yet the wounds are still as fresh as if it happened yesterday. He's turned into something of a hermit in a cabin on the coast of Maine, shearing sheep and gardening to live, an old Passamaquoddy woman his only friend. Elaine is eight months pregnant and on the run from her husband, a hard man more interested in control than love. Fear is simply a part of her life, fear for herself and her unborn child.

When Elaine turns up outside Peter's cabin during one of Maine's worst winter storms in years, Peter can't turn her away into the ice. Holed up together in his one-room home, the two troubled, lonely adults clash, then slowly discover that friendship, support, and healing can come in the most unlikely places.

A Certain Slant of Light Details

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Author : Cynthia Thayer

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From Reader Review A Certain Slant of Light for online ebook

Sandy says

Interesting how the theme of this book is virtually identical to the theme of Shreve's 'Light on Snow'. I wonder who 'stole' the theme from whom.

Dana says

Cynthia Thayer's novel from 2000, "A Certain Slant of Light" is achingly beautiful, haunting, disturbing, and heartbreaking. It is the story of two lost souls, a middle aged widower who lost his family in a fire decades earlier, and a young pregnant woman on the run from her husband, and the life they build together for awhile in his cabin in remote coastal Maine. There was so much pain and sadness in this book, for animals, humans, and for me, as the reader, but I could not put it down. Thayer's writing is literary in style. I wish I were studying this one in a college class. It is filled with symbolism and offers so much fodder for deep thought.

Megan says

A Certain Slant of Light was a surprise to me ~ I reserved it at the library, expecting it to be A Certain Slant of Light by Laura Whitcomb. I never checked the author's name when reserving this book, because it never once occurred to me that *two* books with this title would have been published in the last decade. Joke was on me, right? ;)

Actually, wrong, because I enjoyed this A Certain Slant of Light much better than I would have thought. Once upon a time, I was a big fan of literary fiction. Lately, the action packed books I have been reading have left me with little patience for journeys of self discovery and personal growth. As soon as I began reading A Certain Slant of Light I *knew* it wasn't the book I thought it was, and expected to roll my eyes at the pretentiousness of it (and in some places I did), yet I was drawn in anyway, and wasn't able to put it down.

On the surface, this is the tale of Peter, a man who lost his wife and children in a house fire quite a few years ago. Since the fire, he has withdrawn from society and lives the life of a hermit in coastal Maine. Peter makes his living from the land, has limited contact with people and is for the most part self sufficient. Elaine, a pregnant woman on the run from her Jehovah Witness husband, with a past and secrets of her own, shows up at Peter's door one morning and the two begin an unlikely partnership. Through this relationship and of course Peter's closeness with the land, and his animals, A Certain Slant of Light explores the cycle of life, birth and death. I'm not sure if this book is for everybody, but it has always been my dream to quit my proper job and make a living very much like Peter does (except, of course for the hunting and raising animals for food. My ideal hippie, hermit farm is *totally* a peaceful, happy no-kill farm!) As such, I didn't mind the long passages describing tending the garden or the goats, or any of the other mundane tasks that keep Peter busy during his days. I loved that Peter was so connected to his home, his land, and his animals.

As with all books of this sort by the time we had reached the end not too much had happened, but everyone did change a little along the way. I would have loved more; for the story to continue until a clear resolution

had been reached. But then again, stories don't always have a clear resolution, do they? This sort of book is hard for me to review. A Certain Slant of Light is so personal, and who is to say if two people will have the same experience reading it? I do recommend it for people with the patience for literary fiction, and anyone who harbors a secret desire to be a farmer.

Finally, after writing this review, I looked on GR to see what other people had said about this book. One woman remarked,

"I absolutely loved the story in this book and would honestly have given it 5 stars if it were not for the language, the crude things added in here and there with absolutely no relevance to the story, and the very crass final page of the book. WHY would anyone end a book with that last page? The ending was good, leave it."

Huh? Yeah, there was some cursing, and I know certain people become very offended by bad language, but I was mystified by the "crass" ending??? This book was far from "crass" or "crude" and for the life of me I couldn't think of what was so offensive about the ending. So, this isn't a spoiler at all, but on the last page, Peter goes to bed and "...pulls the blanket over his body, he closed his eyes, imagines her lying on the sheets. His hand finds a comfortable place over his genitals." Ah-hahaha! There is no masturbation scene; Peter just puts his hand on his junk, listens to the sounds in the cabin, the woods, his heartbeat, his breath, the end. People make me laugh =)

Grace says

This is another of those stories that I just don't get. It starts off with a young lady that runs away from home and her husband to find answers. Except, she'd totally unprepared, nearing giving birth, and totally religious and scared she'll be punished by not only her god, but also her entire church.

When she runs away, she meets and stays with an old man that's old enough to be her father. This old man has a lot of unresolved issues of his own, so he's very crotchety. He resists her staying, even though he doesn't want to toss her out into a winter ice storm while she's 8 months pregnant, doubly so when she's scared of her husband who hit her. So, an uneasy alliance while the weather clears.

You'd think that this could make a very touching story of healing. And, I suppose, in a way, it does. Except it's also vaguely creepy and uncomfortable for the following reasons:

- 1.) The old man falls in love with and begins to have sexual fantasies about this young woman that could be his daughter (never mind she's married and going to have someone's kid).
- 2.) It's never sat with me very well when someone is abusive, and her husband hit her hard enough to bruise her face. And she still wants to go back?!
- 3.) I know very little about Jehovah's Witness's lives; this book portrays them as fairly cultish and domineering. I've not quite come to terms with that little aspect yet.

All in all, I'm glad it was a shortened book put into a Reader's Digest book. If was any longer, I'd have to have put it down or chucked the book into the "to sell" pile without finishing it. It's really not my type of story, characters, themes or messages.

Cathy Houston says

an intricately plotted story; but you really care about the characters and the outcome

Katherine Pederson says

I'm glad I read other reviews before forcing myself to finish this book. I found Peter to be an implausible character and by page 70 I had to give up.

Peter Allen says

Riveting. I love this writer's style and subject matter. Thank you, Cynthia Thayer.

Hannah says

I'm so glad I read the synopsis to this book on Goodreads while I was looking for another book with the same title. This book was pleasant surprise to the dreckage of the other one, and had a story I won't soon forget.

20 years ago, Peter MacQueen lost his wife and 2 kids in a house fire. He had been away from home at the time, competing in a bagpipe competition at some highland games somewhere. His life shattered by bitter regrets and loss, he moves to a summer cabin on the coast of Maine, and for the next 20 years he lives basically like a hermit; shut off from other people and keeping a closed door on his heart. Peter ekes out a small living as a sheep farmer. He's alive, but that's about all you can say. He exists.

During a March ice storm, Peter looks out his cabin window and sees a heavily pregnant woman making her way through the forest. She's blue with cold and it's all she can do to keep her feet. Peter wants nothing to do with her, but he can't leave her outside to die. Peter takes her in, only for a day, but 1 day turns into 2, and then a week, and then a month. Her name is Elaine. She wants to stay. She has a past as well, and wants time to make some important decisions for her life and the life of her child.

As Thayer's subtle tale of redemption slowly unfolds, the reader learns more about Peter's tragic loss and Elaine's backstory. It is a love story of sorts, but not in the conventional way. It's more a story of 2 people learning to come to grips with their past and forging a new direction for their lives. The ending is bittersweet. People who like HEA's might not be pleased, but for me it struck a perfect chord, and made sense within the context of the story.

One of the things I liked most about Thayer's story was her descriptions of playing the bagpipes. I've always loved bagpipe music, and the way that Thayer talked about the instrument and the various ballands and laments was beautifully done. She either did alot of research on this subject, or she knows about bagpipes firsthand. Some of the ballads/laments were chapter titles (some I even knew!!), so that part was fascinating.

For my money, Thayer's *A Certain Slant of Light* is the clear winner.

Dyana says

I closed my eyes and inserted my hand into one of my many boxes of books to read and came up with this gem. It is an engrossing story about two people - a woman who wants to be rescued from her guilt and a man who doesn't want to be rescued by anybody. The title of the book describes a type of light slanting in a window at the height of winter. It was a moving and plausible story.

Peter McQueen is so traumatized by the death of his wife and two children in a house fire twenty years previously while he was away at a bagpipe competition, that he has withdrawn from life and lives as a hermit on the northern coast of Maine near Bangor. He lives in a one-room cabin with no plumbing or electricity and has become self-sufficient by raising sheep for their wool, gardening, and cutting wood. His only companions are his old dog named Dog, his horse named Alice, his goat named Ruby, and his chickens. The only friend who understands him and asks no questions is an old Passamaquoddy woman named Dora who lives nearby. His pain over the loss of his family is still so fresh and debilitating that he has a dollhouse with dolls representing his wife and children. He puts them to bed each night, moves them around during the day, and talks to them.

One day during a March ice storm, a young pregnant woman named Elaine Sinclair shows up outside his cabin. She has a huge bruise under her eye, harbors secrets, is a member of the Jehovah Witness, and loves to sing. Peter reluctantly takes her in, but is adamant she is to leave the next day. He wants nothing to interrupt his daily routine and is embarrassed by the dollhouse. He even makes up a name for his dog who he calls Dog, because he is afraid of what she might think of him. She is adamant that she is staying. One day turns into two and two turns into months. Elaine's controlling husband, Oliver, keeps showing up to demand she come home, but she keeps telling him she needs time to make some decisions and would he please return a little black diary of hers. This is crucial to her back story and the antagonism of Oliver and the elders of their church. Peter and Elaine, after their initial clash, begin to get along with each other and slowly discover that friendship, support, and healing are taking place in both their lives. Dora is a midwife and helps deliver baby Azelin when it's time. Dora also teaches Elaine how to spin wool. Peter's sheep live on a nearby island and, after a day of shearing wool, a tragedy occurs which brings Elaine to the decision she has been pondering over and leads Peter to face up to why he has been so guilty over his family's death.

Peter hasn't played his bagpipe since the fire and begins to be interested in music once again. Each chapter is titled from a ballad or song which Elaine sings or Peter played in his past life. Music is a major part of both of their lives. I had to go to the internet and look up bagpipes, because there was lots of descriptions on the parts of a bagpipe. Even with their age difference, Peter begins to believe that the two of them could make a life together as he unwittingly falls in love with her. This is a bittersweet story because the ending is different than what you might expect.

I was raised on a farm so the ample descriptions of killing, plucking, and cleaning a chicken; the goat delivering a baby, or the castrating of sheep didn't gross me out like some reviewers indicated. And I didn't find the last page to be as inappropriate as some thought. Remember, this man was a hermit for over twenty years with no human contact to speak of. A rich story that moved and captivated me.

Darlene says

An aromatic and flavorful paella; the rural culture of coastal Maine; a 20-year widower addicted to solitude and a pregnant married runaway; island shepherding and garden-and-barn-to-table farming; midwifery; bagpipes and Gaelic lullabies; Jehovah's Witness Community; and the healing of haunted hearts.

Kellie says

This was a very interesting read. It is a story about a man, Peter, who lives on the northern coast of Maine. He lives alone in a small cabin. His family died in a fire. During an ice storm, a pregnant woman knocks on his door. She has a bruise on her face and she asks if she could take shelter in the cabin for a while. It turns out she is a Jehovah's Witness. She has runaway from her husband who obviously punched her in the face. So, Peter and Elaine share this cabin for what is suppose to be just a day or two, turns out to be several months. The author has a wealth of knowledge about gardening, sheep and the bagpipes. I actually learned a few things. Slowly, page by page, we learn about Peter and Elaine and why Peter is still haunted about the death of his wife and kids. Why Elaine's husband hit her and how her religion has played a large part in her life. I wasn't expecting to like this book this much. I am glad I read it and would be interested in reading another one by this author.

Barbara Moher says

I did not enjoy this one....way too much technical bagpipe and music stuff in there for me.... and the dog died, I knew it was coming but it was just too sad....I did finish it but I considered stopping many time, just not my type of book. The religion, the implausibility of the whole situation and then throw in all the religion and thoughts of going back to the abusive husband, Peter's unbelievable life....glad it is done

Miette says

This book was set in coastal Maine, which I know and love. I found it nearly impossible to put down and stayed up super-late reading it as a result. This book concerned a man who had lost his family in a fire and who hadn't recovered, and a pregnant woman who was a Jehovah's Witness who stumbled into his life. I found the descriptions of how their relationship developed and how we got to know them very interesting. I'm not sure how I feel about the ending, but I really enjoyed reading the book and I would recommend it.

Maureen Rae says

I was looking for a book without a fairytale happy ending. While the ending wasn't the typical happily ever after, I didn't like the ending. I finished feeling like there was a lot more to know about the main character's mental and emotional well being that wasn't said.

Marla says

3.5 stars. I read the wrong book! I meant to read *A Certain Slant of Light* by Laura Whitcomb. Thank goodness it was a strange but interesting book, but shame on you Cynthia Thayer for tricking readers into reading/buying your book.

This is a very different story about an older man living a secluded life in a one room cabin in rural Maine...and this pregnant woman shows up on his door step in an ice storm and turns his life upside down. I am a temperate weather kind of gal, so this is too cold for me, but I do live in snow country so I can relate.

Likes:

- * References to the certain slants of light
- * Elaine's singing
- * Bagpipe maintenance and playing
- * Sheep shearing
- * Life in rural Maine
- * Old Dora
- * Jehovah Witness elders seemed reasonable and wise most of the time
- * Elaine praying and listening for the answer to her prayers

Dislikes:

- * Awkward on purpose and at times unsettling, even distasteful
(view spoiler)

With-reservations:

masturbation, violence, language
