



## Winter Haven

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## **Winter Haven** Athol Dickson

A twisting mystery exploring God's response to honest questions as a woman's search into her brother's death exposes dark secrets from a town's past.

## **Winter Haven Details**

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Author : Athol Dickson

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## **From Reader Review Winter Haven for online ebook**

### **Dianne says**

Only thing I didn't like is it's a little wordy and descriptive. It takes a little cult religion, a little folklore, a little mental instability, a little mystery and mixes it all together for an enjoyable read. Vera's likable and the ending is satisfying.

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### **Annette says**

This is a really GOOD book. Very cleverly written. In depth characterizations, mystery, history, and a bit of spooky thown in! I could truly relate to Vera's lack of confidence and her shy, mousy personality, a result of her overbearing father and the loss of her mother and brother. Yet, through the story, she finds herself, and discovers how to climb out of the darkness that was her past.

Highly recommended.

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### **Mara says**

I was really not enjoying this book until I got to the very end, which almost made up for the turgidness of the prose. The last chapter saved the book from getting an even lower rating.

This is a story of Vera, a young woman (much younger than she acts) who sets off to pick up the body of her brother who has washed up on the shore of a small Maine island. How we got there, and why he doesn't appear to have aged in 13 years, are the "mystery" of the book. The answer, when it is finally revealed, is fairly straightforward, and not unsatisfying.

In the course of finding that out, though, Vera must deal with her own guilt over not stopping her brother from running away, and her belief that her "visions" of what happened to her brother are actually punishments from God. She must also deal with unkind islanders, a "ghost", and a too-handsome man (with a wandering eye) who might be friend or might be foe.

One might suppose that all of those factors would combine to make a compelling story. Alas, that is not the case. Dickson gets too bogged down in his first-person narration to let the story run naturally. We are teased with hints and glimpses of what's really going on, but Vera's overdrawn naivete prevents us from finding anything in the story that will allow us to be drawn in.

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### **Jessica says**

I stumbled upon this book on a shelf at the train station. The description seemed captivating enough so I shoved it into my bag and got on the train. I ended up not reading it at all that weekend, and read other books before I finally picked this one up.

I'm glad I finally made the effort to read it. First off, any book that starts with a map, I'm sold. After the map, the mystery hooked me.

Vera Gamble is a woman in her mid-twenties leading a sad, lonely life, persistently avoiding the dark memories of her past. She lives in Dallas, Texas, her only remaining family her father, living with Alzheimer's in a nursing home. Within the first few pages we're introduced to a 13-year-old tragedy from Vera's past, when she receives a phone call her long lost brother's body had been found on a small island far off the coast of Maine.

The mystery deepens when we learn Vera's brother, Siggy, lived with Autism, and spoke only through Bible verses. He had Savant Syndrome enabling him to memorize the Bible and recite it in seven different languages. How did this 15-year-old challenged young man make it across the country where his body was found washed up on a beach? He couldn't possibly have traveled the distance by himself, could he? The police investigation 13 years old surmised he must have been kidnapped.

Vera travels to the isolated island of Winter Haven, shrouded in fog, where the few villagers are strangely rude or silent, and largely absent from the quiet streets. Vera is shown her brother's body in the only "facility," if it can be called that, available to the islanders, the Packing Shed, where the fisherman's catch is kept on ice.

Vera is at first insistent the body in Packing Shed couldn't possibly be her brother's. It's too small. It had been 13 years; Siggy's body should be that of a 28-year-old man. All evidence to the contrary, the island's police chief presents her with a tag on a lanyard found with the body, with Siggy's name, the Dallas address and phone number from when they were children, and, in her now-deceased mother's handwriting, the words, "I am not dangerous," for those unaware of Siggy's diagnosis. If the body is not Siggy, how did this person get this tag?

The police chief persists in his investigation, and Vera is shocked to finally confront the body to discover not only is it really her brother, but he remains unchanged from when she last saw him when he left the house at the age of 15. How could this be? What, or whom, had Ziggy found in this place that caused his death?

She is plagued by disturbing memories of her childhood; her mother dying and her faith-healer preacher father's insistence they should not call a doctor; by her father's sermons calling upon God to praise him for sending "Prophet Siggy" to their congregation. Her father is abusive and heavy-handed in his strict religious beliefs, her mother subservient, and Siggy, absent. Her memories of her childhood, experienced through "episodes," possibly seizures, were some of the most disturbing portions of the book for me.

During her search for answers, Vera must fight the "outsider's syndrome," not being an islander, she is not taken in or accepted by the villagers. They don't seem to want her there. She must reside at the home of the hateful, argumentative Widow Abernathy, cloaked in everpresent black, who has the only available place for her to sleep, the small island having no actual hotel. The Widow seems to dislike her upon sight, and she's up to some awfully suspicious activity in the cellar.

According to the widow, the island is haunted by a witch, Evangeline, and by the ghosts of lost pilgrims, shipwrecked on the island hundreds of years before. The island setting is spooky, dark, and forbidding, with deep woods and sheer cliffs, all of which Vera must combat to find the truth of her brother's death. All on her own, since the islanders will give her no assistance, she bravely crosses the island to find Bleak Beach where her brother's body washed up. It is there she runs into the equally mysterious Evan Frost, the solitary wealthy man who owns nearly half the island, and lives part of the time in his rundown mansion. But, this handsome

man is definitely hiding something. There's strange noises seemingly falling Vera around the island and outside the Widow's home she's pelted with rocks from Bleak Beach after she visits its shores, despite the Widow's warnings for her to steer clear. There's a circle of standing stones in the woods, where it appears sacrificial offerings are made. Everything and everyone seems determined to prevent Vera from discovering the truth of her brother's final moments, but she is committed to the truth, no matter what it costs her.

I was fairly riveted to the book, the dreary October weather we're experiencing at present provided a perfect backdrop, and I finished it in under a week. The book was scarier than I expected, and I'm glad I took a chance on it and stuck it in my bag at the train station! I would likely read another book by Athol Dickson.

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### **Gerda Jongsma says**

Na het lezen van dit boek kijk ik er met gemengde gevoelens op terug. Het verhaal komt naar mijn mening te langzaam op gang en heeft iets te veel mysterieuze momenten waardoor het juist vaag wordt, in de negatieve zin van het woord. Als die vreemde aanvallen van Vera Gamble eerder uitgelegd waren, in plaats van ze eerst als dromen te behandelen, was het misschien minder zweverig voor mij geweest. Maar nu haakte ik bijna af.

Wat nog gezegd moet worden: aan het eind komt er wel op alles een antwoord. Dat is een pluspunt, dan heb ik me er dus niet voor niets doorheen geworsteld. En de afronding is op z'n minst gezegd ook netjes gedaan. Duidelijke afronding, zonder dat het einde uitgerekt wordt. Vandaar ook alsnog de 3/5\*.

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### **Hannah Gaudette says**

There are so many books in this world to love. This one tops the list and blows the others out of the water.

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### **Kristina says**

A solid story from an author who doesn't disappoint.

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### **rjp316 says**

This book was ok. I liked the mystery part of it and was surprised by the ending and liked the fact that this book was written with clean subject matter with no immorality or obscene language. However I did not like the flowery description of each and every thing. I also had a hard time following some of the dialogue especially when Vera was describing some of Siggy's conversations. I was also frustrated with Vera's conversations with God and her apparent paranoid personality and lack of strength. Also there seemed to be a lot of gothic / cultish material in the book – everything from the description of the trees, alters in the woods, and various ghost stories – which Vera seems to believe. Overall would not recommend.

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## **Kristy says**

Mystery meets supernatural superstitions meets faith...this book has all of that packed into it. It's well-written, suspenseful, and completely surprising. I love how the author took a mystery that had every sign of being other-worldly in nature and turned it into something so easily and simply explained, yet at the same time an explanation that deepens faith. We so often forget how far-reaching and exhaustive the works of God are, and that His plans span decades. This story is a great reminder.

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## **Natalya says**

It was really slow. But the ending and theme redeemed it. Dickenson created a unique story, I only wish he had a more engaging writing style.

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## **Cliff says**

This book gives a perspective on what effects a fearful, people pleasing, don't dare question God, I need to look good, I dare not fail parent can have on innocent children. The mental turmoil and confusion can destroy faith, reason, and understanding and can lead to questioning ones self, questioning the motives of others, and questioning one's purpose in life. The book has 333 pages and could have been a better read if much of the unnecessary fill would have been eliminated. I skimmed over about 1/4 of the text.

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## **Donna says**

The description on the jacket of this book sounded great, but it turned out to be just silly. I don't know why I read the whole thing, except that I guess I kept waiting for it to get better! It never did.

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## **Roger says**

Told from first person female POV by a male author was interesting, but I think he gets away with it. Book was well written, story good old-fashioned ghost-ish tale, kept my interest. A bit too god-preachy for the most part though, which turns me off, thanks. I only learned later that it is to be expected from this author. Now I know, and will therefore avoid.

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## **Lisa says**

Another one I absolutely did not want to put down. This book proves there doesn't need to be obscene language or immorality to be interesting and engaging. It was fantastic. My husband asked me if I was coming to bed and I said, "I want to but I just can't! I have to see what happens!" Winter Haven had me guessing through the whole book and just when I thought I had it figured out it turns out I didn't! Loved it till

the very end.

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### **Georgann says**

Meh. Our heroine was just too..mousy, I guess, and kept going over the same thing again and again. My husband and I listened to audio version on a trip and I told him if this was a book, I'd skip the whole middle and get to the end to see the mysteries solved. It did resolve satisfactorily, but all in all, just meh.

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