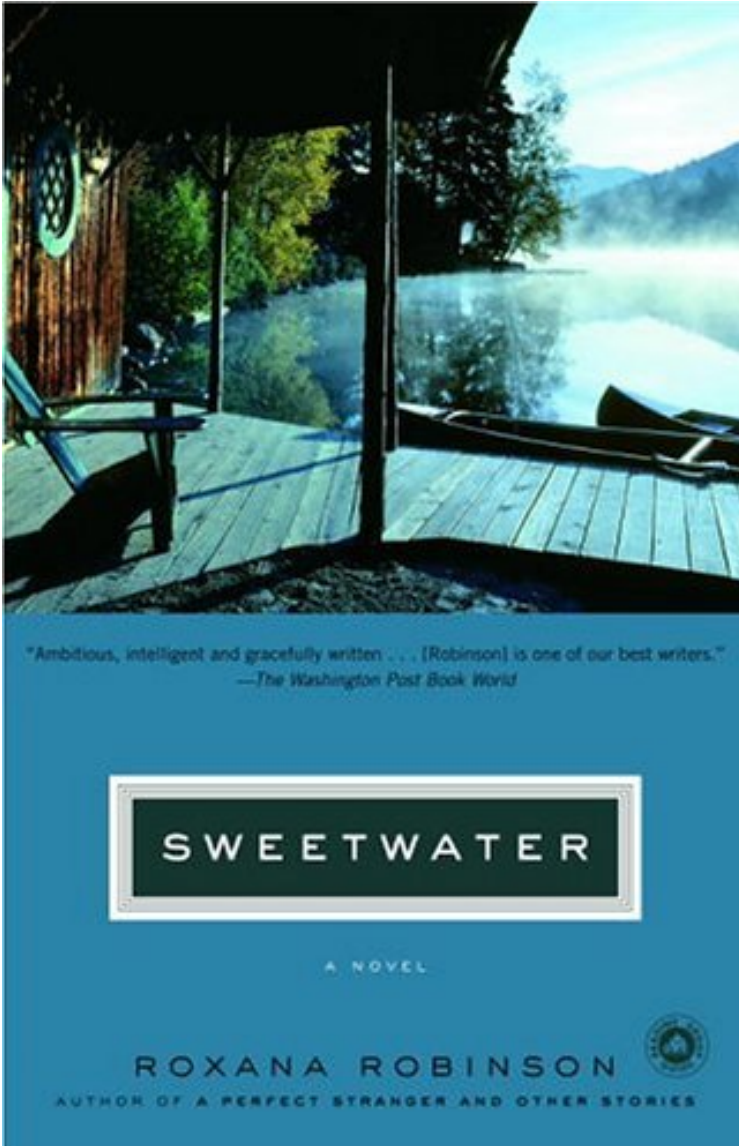


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Sweetwater: A Novel



Par Roxana Robinson
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn this brilliant, luminous novel, one of our finest realist writers gives us a story of surpassing depth and emotional power. Acclaimed for her lucid and compassionate exploration of the American family, Roxana Robinson sets her new work on familiar terrainNew York City and the Adirondacksbut with Sweetwater she transcends the particulars of the domestic sphere with a broader, more encompassing vision. In this poignant account of a young widow and her second marriage, Robinson expands her scope to include the larger natural world as well as the smaller, more intimate one of the home. Isabel Greens marriage to Paul Simmons, after the death of her first husband, marks her reconnection to lifea venture shes determined will succeed. But this proves to be harder than shed anticipated, and the challenges

of starting afresh seem more complicated in adulthood. Staying at the Simmons lodge for their annual summer visit, Isabel finds herself entering into a set of familial complexities. She struggles to understand her new husband, his elderly, difficult parents and his brother, whose relationship with Paul seems oddly fraught. Furthermore, her second marriage begins to cast into sharp relief the troubling echoes of her first.

Isabel's professional life plays a part as well: a passionate environmental advocate, she is aware of the tensions within the mountain landscape itself during a summer of spectacular beauty and ominous drought. In her cool, elegant prose, Robinson gracefully delivers a plot that is complex, surprising and ultimately wrenching in its impact. As the strands of family are woven tightly and inevitably together, and as the past painfully informs the present, the vivid backdrop of the physical world provides its own eloquent dynamic.

Sweetwater is a stunning achievement by a writer at the peak of her craft. From the Hardcover edition. **Chapter 1** The cabin was cool and dark, smelling of wood. Isabel set down her duffel bag inside the front door. Without looking at the unknown rooms on either side, she went straight down the dim hall to the door at the far end, a bright oblong of light. She pushed open the screen and stood looking out over the porch to the lake beyond. It was late afternoon. The broad lake was still full of light, but across it, on the western shore, was a rising mass of shadow. The water was quiet, the reflections perfectly still: there, in silvery echoes, were the low wooded hills that ringed the lake, with the pure indigo sky above it. Isabel heard her husband behind her, his footsteps hollow on the bare floorboards. When he reached her, she spoke without turning. This is beautiful. It was her first visit here; she had only been married to Paul since February, seven months. We like it, Paul said. He had come here every summer of his life, fifty-one years. He stood just behind Isabel, setting his hands on her shoulders. He was tall but light-boned, rangy and lean, without bulk. His hands on her were nearly weightless. Were letting the flies out, he said, and Isabel stepped obediently onto the porch, his hands awkwardly still on her. The outer walls of Acorn Cabin were unpainted shingle, faded to silver gray from decades of Adirondack weather. Beyond the porches rustic railing peeled gnarly cedar the ground sloped down mildly toward the water. Lets go to the lake, Isabel said. They had spent the day in the car, driving up from New York, and what she wanted now was air and light, open water.

Exploration of the dark rooms of the cabin could wait. Paul led the way down a narrow path through underbrush and young saplings. The air was dry and ferny and sweet. Through the trees the sight of water flickered intermittently, pale and calm. It was lost between branches, glimpsed again, glittering and wider, and then finally, as they turned a corner and arrived at the shore, the lake spread out before them, shimmering and complete. Down here at its edge the lake looked vast, its still-radiant surface immense and untouched. Around them was silence: the faint sibilance of air moving in the treetops, nothing more. It smelled of summer: trees, lake water, heat. This is heaven, Isabel said. Her voice, in the great openness around her, was small. Paul put his arm around her. Exactly, he said with satisfaction. Now will you never leave me? This combination warmth and absurdity made Isabel laugh. She felt a surge of affection, then a flare of hope. Maybe this will work. Hope was what Isabel was bringing to this marriage. It was nearly all she had: grief itself was a kind of death, it seemed. Two years of it had scoured her bare of other feelings. The time seemed past in which joy would rise easily to the surface of her heart and fill it. Grief had established itself at the center of her life, and though it no longer stormed through her, drenching and overwhelming, as it had at first, it was not gone. She still felt the grayness of her first husband's absence from the world, the silence everywhere without his voice. The pain at being unable to tell him things: that she missed him. That she longed for him. That she still loved him. That she hated him for being gone. It had not seemed that grief would ever leave, but after two years it had diminished, and she had determined, herself, to move on, to leave that gray landscape. What she felt for Paul was quieter than what she'd felt for Michael, but everything in her life seemed quieter. This kind of emotional calm and muted was what was left to her. She was forty-seven. All the other things wildness and bliss and desperation, rage, the urgency of sex lay behind her. She no longer expected them. What she aimed for now was loyalty and affection. Much of marriage was partnership; she didn't want to be old alone. When she was old she wanted someone with her whom she trusted, someone she knew. What she felt for Paul was a powerful tenderness, and she knew this would increase. Affection deepens over time and hardship; compassion strengthens with the years. What Isabel wanted was something quiet, durable, domestic. A backwater, somewhere safe. She was done with storms. She leaned against Paul. She was still trying to learn his body, still teaching her own to expect it. There were moments when it still felt strange: too tall, too angular, for comfort. She tilted her head back against Paul's chest and looked straight up, at the great arch of sky. Its so clear, she said. Too clear, actually, Paul answered. Were hoping for rain. There's a serious drought. Its hardly rained in months. Isabel looked

again, scanning the deep blue for a wisp of cloud, a skein of high mist, but there was nothing. The reaches overhead were empty. She liked Pauls knowing about the weather here, even when he was away. Did you come up here for the whole summer? she asked. When you were little? Always a month, sometimes six weeks, Paul answered. My mother would come up with me and Whit. My father came up for long weekends and the last couple of weeks in August. My grandparents were here for the whole summer. We stayed in Acorn, they stayed in the lodge. Sweetwater Lodge was the original house, built by Pauls maternal great-grandparents in the 1890s. The three cabins Acorn, Oyster and Whistle had been built during the twenties for grown children. Over a century later, the whole place the houses and several hundred acres of land was owned by a complicated family trust. Pauls mother and her two brothers each spent a summer month at the lodge, their children in the cottages. Just now Pauls parents, Douglas and Charlotte, were in the lodge; Paul and Isabel were to have Acorn for two weeks. Do you and Whitney share the cottage? Isabel asked. No, its mine unless he gets married. The rule is, you dont get a cabin until youre married. Until then you stay at the lodge. Isabel had never met Pauls brother, Whitney. He lived in Wyoming, where he did something in the national parks. He hadnt been able to come to their wedding; a blizzard had closed the Laramie airport for three days. He was forty-five, unmarried. Isabel had wondered if he was gay, but it was a question she wasnt ready to ask: there was a faint chill in Pauls voice when he spoke of Whitney. And will Whit get married, do you think? Isabel risked. Doubtful, Paul said, cool. Probably gay, then, she thought. Maybe that was why Paul was so disapproving. Does he come here often? Not anymore, Paul said. I guess the Adirondacks are small potatoes compared to the Bighorns. And Geordie? Geordie was Pauls son from his first marriage, his only child. Geordie was twenty-eight and lived in Vancouver, where he was a producer for the local television station. Isabel had met him only once, at their wedding. Geordie was tall and lanky, like Paul, with a long face nearly identical to his fathers: the same high cheekbones, the same ascetic hollows in the lean cheeks, the same wide, mobile mouth. Isabel had been so happy to meet him. Hed seemed so like another, earlier version of his father that she felt as though shed been magically permitted to meet Paul as a young man. Shed stepped forward, beaming, to embrace this other, earlier Paul. But Geordie would have none of it. He had leaned away from her embrace, his expression cool and distant. He barely put his arms around her; his touch was light and unwilling. He bowed ironically as she kissed his cheek. He scarcely met her eyes, and his gaze flicked away at once. Disappointed, Isabel stepped back and dropped her arms to her sides. What had his mother told him about her? As a matter of fact, this will be the first summer Geordie has missed, Paul said. Why isnt he coming? Hes been invited on a great rock-climbing trip. Apparently it was an offer he couldnt refuse. Isabel wondered if Geordies absence was because of her presence. She wondered whether Paul would tell her. Isabels own son, Ben, would not be coming up to the lake, either. He was working for a law firm in New York for the summer, and it was too long a trip for a weekend. Ben and Geordie had met at the wedding, too. Isabel had hoped theyd become friends, but when she saw them stiffly shaking hands, their chins lifted warily, she saw they would not. It was too late to make a new family; everyone was too old. These two would never feel like brothers. They were genetic competitors from different herds. Ben had been welcoming to Paul, at least, and hed been kind when Isabel had first told him. They were in the apartment, in her bedroom. Isabel was sitting in the maple chair at her desk, Ben on her bed. I want you to meet someone, she said. It felt awkward to say this, like a confession. Do you mind? she asked, anxious. Does it feel like a betrayal? Ben sat slouching, his knees splayed. His feet were tipped on their sides, soles facing each other. No. He shook his head, looking down at his running shoes. Ive thought about this. Itll be weird to see you with someone else, but I dont want you to be alone. You should be happy. You should have someone. He raised his head and looked at her. Dads gone. At the wedding Ben had stayed near. Once, during the reception, when Paul put his arm around her, she felt Bens gaze on her and turned. He smiled and silently lifted his glass, high and ceremonial. Now Isabel and Paul stood side by side without touching. The lake was silent. Far out on the water some creature rose to the surface with a small tock, then fell away. Ripples moved swiftly away from the vanished presence. Here is his center, Isabel thought. Does it make you nervous, having me here? she asked, teasing. Not so far, Paul said. Should it? Is it dangerous? Just that Ill know so much about you. Youll have nowhere to hide. I feel as though your whole life is here. Thats sort of the point, Paul said. He reached up and smoothed her hair, clumsily, as though he were stroking a dog. Were in this together now. I trust you. He smiled at her. Do you want to go back and unpack, take the grand tour of the cabin? They turned from the lake and set off up the path through the trees. Acorn Cabin was small and simple: a center hall with three tiny bedrooms on one side, a kitchen and bathroom on the other. The walls were unpainted wood the color of dark honey. The floors were bare, and the rooms were lit by ceiling

bulbs. This is us, said Paul, opening the door to the bedroom closest to the lake. On either side of the window was a single bed, neatly made up with a faded green bedspread. Between the beds stood a square table of unpeeled white birch; on the walls were flyspecked black-and-white photographs of Adirondack views: flat lakes, rising mountains. Wonderful, said Isabel, looking around. The room felt clean; the floor was swept, and the air held the faintly spicy smell of old wood. Was this your room when you were little? Of course not, Paul said. The grown-ups got the lake view. The children got the impenetrable forest vistas. The next room was smaller, with two bunk beds. A rush-bottomed chair stood against the wall. The window looked into the deep woods. This was mine, Paul said. No view, but since I was older, I got the room closer to the view. There's nothing of you here, Isabel said, looking around. Didn't you have a panda or something? Wasn't there something you always went to see when you first arrived? Not inside, Paul said. There are places like that out in the woods. The tree where my hideout was. Where I used to ambush Whit. Why didn't you two share a room? Isabel asked. You make it sound as though you were deadly enemies. Paul shrugged, turning to leave. Whit and I always had separate rooms. We fought a lot; fighting was the way we played. We spent all our time together, but it was strategic interaction, not fraternizing. War was our business. The spartan room next door was identical: the bare bunks, the slat-backed chair. Isabel moved on to the kitchen, the largest room. It had blurred linoleum on the floor and open shelves, full of cans. There was a small electric stove, a deep porcelain sink, and an old high-legged refrigerator. The square wooden table had a metal top; around it stood four high-backed chairs. Isabel looked around at the room. I can't picture Louisa here, she said. Louisa formidable, opinionated, impatient would have had something to say about this shadowy, antiquated setup. From what Isabel had gathered, Louisa had something to say about everything. Louisa had left Paul just as she was getting her Ph.D. in French literature at Columbia University, after eighteen years of marriage. She had come home after taking her orals and asked him to move out. She was adamant, Paul told Isabel, there was no discussion. It had come as a head-ringing blow to him: he had thought they were happy. But Louisa had been chillingly sure they were not. She now taught Balzac and the Rise of the Nineteenth Century at Barnard College. From the Hardcover edition.

Presentation de l'auteur In this brilliant, luminous novel, one of our finest realist writers gives us a story of surpassing depth and emotional power. Acclaimed for her lucid and compassionate exploration of the American family, Roxana Robinson sets her new work on familiar terrain New York City and the Adirondacks but with *Sweetwater* she transcends the particulars of the domestic sphere with a broader, more encompassing vision. In this poignant account of a young widow and her second marriage, Robinson expands her scope to include the larger natural world as well as the smaller, more intimate one of the home. Isabel Green's marriage to Paul Simmons, after the death of her first husband, marks her reconnection to life a venture she's determined will succeed. But this proves to be harder than she'd anticipated, and the challenges of starting afresh seem more complicated in adulthood. Staying at the Simmons lodge for their annual summer visit, Isabel finds herself entering into a set of familial complexities. She struggles to understand her new husband, his elderly, difficult parents and his brother, whose relationship with Paul seems oddly fraught. Furthermore, her second marriage begins to cast into sharp relief the troubling echoes of her first. Isabel's professional life plays a part as well: a passionate environmental advocate, she is aware of the tensions within the mountain landscape itself during a summer of spectacular beauty and ominous drought. In her cool, elegant prose, Robinson gracefully delivers a plot that is complex, surprising and ultimately wrenching in its impact. As the strands of family are woven tightly and inevitably together, and as the past painfully informs the present, the vivid backdrop of the physical world provides its own eloquent dynamic. *Sweetwater* is a stunning achievement by a writer at the peak of her craft. From the Hardcover edition.