



## In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden

*Kathleen Cambor*

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A love story set in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, before and after the 1889 dam disaster that took more than two thousand lives, chronicles the greed and abuse of power in post-Civil War America.

### **In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden Details**

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Author : Kathleen Cambor

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## **From Reader Review In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden for online ebook**

### **Marguerite says**

I liked this, but found Kathleen Cambor's abrupt switches from "upstairs" characters to "downstairs" characters difficult to follow. I also appreciate historical accuracy, but the 19th-century fashion terms and vocabulary became annoying very quickly. Cambor did a good job of maintaining tension, given that we all know how this story ends. The ambiguity at the end of the book also worked for me. I'll look for more books by the author.

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### **Jill Manske says**

How ironic that a book about a disaster is a disaster itself. According to the dust jacket, Kathleen Cambor was the director of a major university's creative writing program. Hmm - maybe this book was an example of what not to do. Anyway, she starts with a good idea, a historical novel about the tragedy of the flooding of Jonestown, Pennsylvania in 1889. But that's where the good ideas stopped. She could have come at the story from a number of different angles, such as how the greed of the "haves" and their disdain for the "have nots" led to their cavalier attitude about the safety of an earthen dam holding water for a lake that was part of an exclusive hunting and fishing club in the Allegheny Mountains. While there's a hint of that in the book, it isn't really emphasized. She also could have told the story about the building of the hunt club and creating the artificial lake from the perspectives of different people, the "haves" and the "have nots". She sort of attempted to do that, but the storyline got really jumbled as she jumped from one person in one year to another person in another year, often within the same paragraph and without a smooth transition. Another failing is the lack of dialog among the characters. The story is mostly told as a narrative, which makes it cumbersome and cold. The characters are described, but you don't get a real feel for them; consequently, you don't really care much about any of them. The one astonishing thing is that you know how it's going to end - the dam will fail and the town below will flood. But Cambor does not build up any suspense about the coming tragedy, so the actual event, when written, is rather anti-climatic. I really and truly tried to like this book. But it fell short in so many ways. I cannot, in good faith, recommend it to anyone.

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### **Diane S ? says**

3.5 When I first started reading this book I will admit to being disappointed because for some reason I thought it was just about the flood and the causes of the flood. After a short while though, the author had drawn me in with this well written story about the families and lives of the people affected by this tragedy. Rich men, Carnegie and Mellon only concerned about their gentleman's club, ignoring warnings from engineers that the dam was very inadequate, showing once again the abuse of power and money. When the flood finally entered the book, it was even more of a shock because now I had connected to many of the characters. Cambor did a wonderful job highlighting the effects of this tragedy on all involved, while also updating the reader on other world events connected with World War II.

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## Graceann says

I think it speaks to how much I enjoyed this book that I started it before the end of January, and only finished it near the end of March. It's only 258 pages, I felt like every page took an hour to read.

I discovered, far too late, that while the Johnstown Flood (the reason I bought the book) features in the story, it only features about 20 pages before the end, and then only for about five pages (if that). I felt like I'd been subjected to a bait and switch.

The 200 pages preceding the flood involve one family living and working in Johnstown, and a few of the rich jerks at the South Fork Hunting and Fishing Club, who ignored warnings about the weakness of the dam, and who did everything they could to distance themselves from their ownership of the Club when the dam failed. Slapped into the middle of it is a fairly trite romance between one of the haves and one of the have-nots.

The only thing that kept me reading was that, every so often, the author would slip in a sentence or paragraph that was breathtaking in its simple beauty. For instance:

*Later, long after they were married, when he watched her forcing a window open after a spring rain, or diapering a baby ... he'd think back to that day, to how love begins.*

There were other moments like this which, for me, were interesting enough to make me hope for more. Sadly, these interludes were few and far between. Instead, there is a lot of to-ing and fro-ing; lingering glances and unspoken secrets. Meanwhile, the real drama and story happen on May 31, 1889 - if you, like me, were turning the pages to read about that, you may be deeply disappointed. I was.

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## Susan (the other Susan) says

The title is drawn from a haunting quote that prefaces the novel. It reads, in part, "...and you'll be there, forever expecting a great misfortune, in sunlight, in a beautiful garden." It was this line that compelled me to carry the book to the checkout line, knowing it would be more than just a history of the horrific Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood. The quote and title establish the mood of what's to come: a sun-filled romance overlaid with foreboding, as Gilded Age privilege and hubris collide with the interests of ordinary people. Upriver from working-class Johnstown, the American robber barons whose wealth came in part from the steel mills where Johnstown men risked their lives every day, built a "rustic" exclusive summer camp. Its luxurious lodge and cabins were built on the shore of a huge man-made lake, held back by a primitive and poorly maintained earthen dam upriver from the narrow valley where Johnstown was located. The protagonists of the fact-based novel's central romance are a young man of working-class parents, and a girl whose well-to-do father is associated with the club that owns the lake. As an innocent flirtation develops into something deeper, the girl's father has grown increasingly concerned about weaknesses in the dam and is attempting without success to convince the club members to acknowledge the gravity of the situation and spend a little of their wealth to reinforce the structure. Against the backdrop of the members' splendid mansions and the everyday lives of Johnstown families, the author paints sweetly nostalgic images of innocent love; a final, carefree season at the deadly lake; and the personal lives of a few key characters, oblivious to the dam's

inevitable collapse...The Johnstown flood, when it finally came, swept the entire town ahead of it like a tsunami, killing thousands of people whose bodies were entangled in metal, crushed by debris and buried in a sea of mud. Survivors were left homeless and jobless, the mill that was the reason for the town's existence having been destroyed. Many children were orphaned. History tells us that no compensation to the victims was required of the dam's negligent owners, who numbered among their membership the wealthiest men in America. They did, however, organize a relief effort that donated blankets. Yes, blankets. You can learn that much about the Johnstown disaster with a Google search. What you will find in the pages of this novel are vivid reasons to grieve and rage: young lovers, parents working to send a son to college, babies in their cribs. None of them expecting their great misfortune.

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### **Suzy Ruskin says**

Great history of the Johnstown Flood. I learned so much about this time in history and enjoyed it.

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### **Helen says**

Very well done. The setting is the first Johnstown (Pa) flood, 1889. The characters inhabit both the capitalists who created the conditions for the flood by damming up rivers for their enjoyment and the folks who live downstream who were at the mercy of their thoughtless, bad decisions. Definitely recommend.

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### **Heather C says**

This novel was a little bit different from what I expected of it; instead of being acutely focused on the events that transpired during and after the Johnstown Flood, it is a character driven novel based primarily on the lead up to the flood (although the aftermath is considered in lesser detail). While reading the book, I remember thinking that it didn't feel like a book about a disaster at all, and I have read my fair share; the events of the flood itself come just a few pages prior to the end of the book. Primarily, it's a story of life in rural/suburban Pennsylvania during a time when real wealth was being complied by the oil, steel, and railroad tycoons, which the everyman toiled, and went on strike, and lived day to day. This is very clearly evoked by the prose of this novel. There is also a thread about growing up and young summer love that twists throughout the plot.

As a reader, you become committed to these characters whose lives are destroyed following the flood, which inevitably occurs in the late pages of the book. These characters represent two essentially distinct groups: those of privilege who enjoy the country club that the South Fork Dam was built to please during the summer months, and the common man living their everyday life in the town below the Dam. The author doesn't make the wealthy a clear cut bad guy, but she does depict them as careless (which they were) for not being worried about the reports about the safety of the Dam, because it didn't affect them. I found the storyline relating to those from the town, particularly Frank Fallon and his family, to be more interesting than the laconic life above the Dam because there appeared to be more happening in their lives.

I would have liked more of a resolution to the novel. As the flood occurs so late in the novel, I was looking for more of the aftermath, but what I got was more of a dropped thread. Being that these characters were the focus of the story, rather than the event, I would have liked to have more about the effect on those who did

live through it. You don't need all the grisly details in an emotionally evocative book like this, but I needed a little more than I got. While this book might not have been what I expected going in to it, I did enjoy the experience of reading it.

Also, as a side note, I'm still confused by the title.

James Daniels does a very good job with the narration here. He enunciates very clearly with a comfortable pause between sentences. It doesn't feel rushed, but his pacing does help to speed up the flow of the narrative that could sometimes feel a little bogged down otherwise. Beyond that, there isn't much to say about the narration. It wasn't a memorable performance, but not bad either.

This review was previously posted at The Maiden's Court blog.

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### **Dani Peloquin says**

I could not wait for this book to arrive and was very disappointed once it did. The author brings in more characters than is necessary and describes their entire personal history. Though the description of the book states that it is about a flooding of a town in 1889, this vital event does not occur until page 240 (there are only 258 pages in the book). In fact, the flood is only described for seven pages before the narration is projected into 1917. Therefore, there is little room for any resolution to these characters that the author has so painstakingly described. In addition, the introduction of the characters seemed contrived and almost appeared as character sketches as opposed to three dimensional people. Possibly more upsetting, is the fact that there is potential in this novel to be an epic in historical fiction. However, in its current state, it falls short.

[www.iamliteraryaddicted.blogspot.com](http://www.iamliteraryaddicted.blogspot.com)

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### **Badly Drawn Girl says**

I was blown away by how beautifully this book was written. I found myself being transported into the middle of the scenery. Kathleen Cambor has a way with words and she paints a vivid picture. This book read like a thriller even though the outcome was known from the beginning. She does a fantastic job of showing the variety of people who were affected by the events, and her research, despite the book being fiction, is on the money. I was so moved by this book that I actually got David McCullough's Johnstown Flood in order to learn more. (Unfortunately, after Kathleen Cambor's prose, I found it a bit dry and plodding.) I highly recommend this book even if you have no interest in history. The characters are memorable, the prose is delicious, and you won't soon forget the plot.

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### **Glynn says**

This book was great. There was a wonderful feel for the time and place as well as for the characters.

I had some background about the flood itself, and have seen an excellent documentary about Andrew Carnegie. I wondered how the book would have seemed to me if I had not been somewhat familiar with the story.

It was a novel though, and as such, I found it fascinating. At first the flash back/ flash forward technique was a little confusing, but by the end of the story, it worked very well.

Probably will want to seek more info about the flood, the area. the era...

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### **Sandra D says**

Terribly overwritten. Desuetude, threnody, marmoreal, pellucid: Cambor needs to back away from the thesaurus. She's trying too hard to be a Great Writer.

But it wasn't all bad. I'd only thought of Frick, Carnegie, et al, as old robber barons, never as young men just starting out, so that was kind of interesting. I wonder how accurate were their portrayals here.

It was more interesting to read about the South Fork club and problems with the dam. I googled photos to see the before and after, and read a little about them online, too. *The Johnstown Flood* by David McCullough is on my wish list, and now I'm eager to read it.

The third thing that held my interest was, well, have you ever visited an old cemetery and stood in front of a row of tombstones bearing the same surname and death dates within a week or so of each other and wondered, what's the story here? I've read about plagues and epidemics, but they're usually from a medical and/or social point of view. It was intriguing to think more personally about survivors of that kind of loss, and how they went on living after.

So, not a great book, but not a total waste of time either.

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### **LuAnn says**

This book was absolutely fascinating. It's the fictionalized account of the 1889 Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood, in which more than 2,000 people lost their lives. However, the author didn't choose to dwell on the facts surrounding the flood -- although that is part of the story. She chose instead to look at the people who lived there. Some are real, such as Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick, but others are from her wonderful imagination. They obviously developed as she did her research for the book.

What I found especially interesting was the fact that as I had just begun the book, I came across a documentary on TV late one night about the flood and how some of the key players contributed to the event. Carnegie and Frick was discussed at length, so I had the opportunity to gain some additional knowledge about those characters in this book. That only added to my enjoyment of it.

Kathleen Cambor has written a very readable historical fiction novel about a very real and important event in our country's past. I would highly recommend this story to anyone who enjoys this sort of read. It may also persuade those who don't typically read this genre to look at other good historical fiction books.

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### **Holly Weiss says**

After reading David McCullough's Johnstown Flood, a non-fiction account of this disaster, I was intrigued by Ms. Cambor's In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden. If one wants the facts surrounding the Johnstown flood, McCullough's work serves well. If one is looking for the human side of the events leading up to this event, I recommend this book. I found it moving and well written. I had heard an interview with Ms. Cambor on the Diane Rehm show of the Public Broadcasting System. If I recall correctly, her idea came from a journal her grandmother(a resident of Johnstown) kept about her relationship with a young man associated with the country club frequented by Mellon, Frick, etc.

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### **Colleen Vargo says**

when we were on vacation last summer, i bought this book in the hotel's run-down gift shop. it appeared to have been read once and then was put back on the shelf to sell. since it was only \$5 and 10+ years old, my expectations were low. but i needed a book, and we were in the middle of the pochanoes. retail isn't this area's strength. better than nothing!

but from page one this book grabbed me. i became very anti-social on our family vacation. it's a fictional story based on the true events surrounding the jonestown flood in the late-1800s (date????). you come to love the characters and fear for them as you know from the beginning that most of them will probably perish. of course there's romance, i wouldn't care much for a book lacking in this area.

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