



Kaaterskill Falls

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In the summer of '76, the Shulmans and the Melishes migrate to Kaaterskill, the tiny town in upstate New York where Orthodox Jews and Yankee year-rounders live side by side from June through August.

Elizabeth Shulman, a devout follower of Rav Elijah Kirshner and the mother of five daughters, is restless. She needs a project of her own, outside her family and her cloistered community.

Across the street, Andras Melish is drawn to Kaaterskill by his adoring older sisters, bound to him by their loss and wrenching escape from the Holocaust. Both comforted and crippled by his sisters' love, Andras cannot overcome the ambivalence he feels toward his children and his own beautiful wife.

At the top of the hill, Rav Kirshner is coming to the end of his life, and he struggles to decide which of his sons should succeed him: the pious but stolid Isaiah, or the brilliant but worldly Jeremy.

Behind the scenes, alarmed as his beloved Kaaterskill is overdeveloped by Michael King, the local real estate broker, Judge Miles Taylor keeps an old secret in check, biding his time....

Kaaterskill Falls Details

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Author : Allegra Goodman

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From Reader Review Kaaterskill Falls for online ebook

Elizabeth says

Enjoyed this even more the second time around. This story about a small Jewish Orthodox community is remarkable. It is closely observed and breaks my heart with its many details about the human condition.

Recommended.

FoxRafer says

This was brilliant. Understated, moving, funny, warm, touching, eye-opening. Ms. Goodman so carefully introduces her characters, slowly reveals them to us, brings them to life in subtly beautiful ways. This community, whether in Washington Heights or Kaaterskill Falls, is vivid on the page. It was a joy to follow them over two years of their lives, seeing their struggles and joys, seeing the world through their eyes. I found this book to be both simple and complex, and she masterfully moves from one household to the next, naturally revealing more of everyone's part of the story in a deliberate but never boring way. I went from feeling great empathy for one character, thinking that actually they really were an awful person, and seeing them redeem themselves in my eyes at the last moment. And my heart broke for one character but seeing her find a way to heal her wounds was uplifting and inspirational. I fell in love with these people, have imagined what their lives were like after the book ended, and thoroughly enjoyed learning about a culture I had very little knowledge of before. A truly incredible book; so glad I chose to read it.

Katherine says

“ ‘If I don’t work with large animals, I want to expose social injustice’ ” (42).

“Old voices that creaked and swung in rhythm, their long phrases like the screen door on the bungalow, closing slowly, partway, a little more, and then, with a long sigh, thumping shut” (52).

"But in his daily studies he still strives to understand, identify, take a text to heart, to reach through the centuries of commentary, those layers of response, and grasp a meaning that is strong, believable. And when it happens, and the words unfold for him and touch his life, this is a moment of great joy. The burden of decision falls away, and he is free, for he knows what he should do" (158).

"He has lived in this particular hierarchy all his life, moved within it as through water, slowly, but without a feeling of constraint" (203).

"It's as if she'd been spinning and then suddenly she stopped, and the world stopped spinning with her; the trees settled back into their places, the scattered house came back together, and the tilted windows slowed and squared themselves" (217).

"How trivial their life is. How insignificant. It is all put on. Tomorrow the week will begin. He will go down to the city and mind his business. He will work the days away, and the days will be light and inconsequential. They will slip through his fingers. They will mean as little to him as a handful of loose change" (230). Sadly perhaps, I'm identifying with Andras's view these days.

"To believe in God morning, noon, and night. To believe in God--and not only to believe in him, but to believe he listens to prayers. What would it be like to have that reassurance? That God would take an interest, and approve or disapprove one's life. How comforting to believe that one's life is significant in that

way. That it is guided by God's will, and not left to chance" (230).

"What a marvelous object she is to them. A ship in a bottle. How did she get in there? How could she get out?" (237).

"She smooths the back of her skirt where it always creases from the stool" (238). What a detail!

"How are you? Nina told us there's been a rabbinical eyebrow raised at you" (243).

"...she sees the letters in the book in front of her, and her lips move, but she is muffled by her own thoughts" (247).

Fabian says

This "Our Town" was constructed with great care & written simplistically. Which baffles considering how organic the characters come off as and how poetic the narrative is.

The only source of symbolism is wallpaper & house panels with floral motifs. That's it. Everything else comes from the simple actions and thoughts of the 20+ characters who inhabit the titular town on the outskirts of NYC. The Jewish summer retreat of magnificent beauty is only a backdrop to the people who both suffer for and become better people because of the shared faith.

There is Elizabeth, mother of 5 girls, who is negated her dream by the community's Rav, who has a prodigal son problem in Jeremy, the cold-hearted bachelor who has lost his religion while his brother, Isaiah must suffer as the obedient child no doubt suffers because of his father's wrath. Then there's Renee, a teenage girl who must please her parents & aunts (we see her future mirrored by Elizabeth & her hardships). Renee's father Andras' true loves are his sisters... not the family he's formed. There's a librarian, a hot shot investor who owns half the township, fathers, sons, wives, daughters. Everyone falls victim to the strict institutions of the Jewish faith... any deviations from it are punishable... but we also bare witness to what occurs if religion is authentic and if followers of it do the right thing.

This novel reads like a journal composed of several individuals because they share many things but all of their experiences are rich & unique. It is everything but pretentious--always a treat for the cynical reader (like me!).

Kkraemer says

This is a beautiful, intense portrait of the small and specific that reveals the grand and general. It's a series of interrelated narratives of people and families who spend their summers together in rural New York, the followers of Rabbi Kirschner. The Rav's family is there and has been for many summers, as are the families of many of his faithful. Summer after summer, the families gather there, and women keep their houses carefully kosher, men commute back and forth to the city for work, and children grow up.

Surrounding these summer families are people of different faiths (mostly, other Jewish groups) and the "locals," who are different from the summer people. The stories reveal lives who are living within a specific set of parameters and negotiating the space between them and with those who are outside of the group.

Beautiful narratives.

They reveal how all of us live both within our circles and negotiate the world beyond them, and the characters in this book are, to a person, thoughtful, good, and spiritual. Goodman is a brilliant writer who can bring the world, both inner and outer, specific and general, utterly alive.

Sharon says

Started slow and boring, but I read it since it was for our book club. Got better as I read further, but I ended up angry at the narrow, selfish, chauvinistic, patriarchal attitude of the leaders of that community-- and of many of the men who flowed so blindly. As I once heard, the only difference between oppressed and oppressor is opportunity and that certainly was evident in this community. Escaping from Germany prior to Kristallnacht, the Rav became as controlling and obsessed with HIS ideas of the right way to dress, eat, work, live as his former oppressors were. He stopped short of physical murder, but was a murderer of dreams. And his son who "inherited" the position of leadership appears to be even more so. Would love to have turned the tables on them.

I'm sure it was a well written book to have evoked such strong feelings, but that does not mean I LIKED it.

Elyse Walters says

Update: Kindle \$1.99 special. This is an older book....but one of Allegra Goodman's great reads. I just bought it myself --and will now give my physical copy away to a friend. If 'Sara'? --Susan? Connie? Mary? others? want to consider this book for our next buddy read, I'd love to re-read this one.

-The kindle download is a good deal today.

....."Kasterskill Falls" is the more interesting story than the Allegra's new release, "The Chalk Artist", in my personal opinion.

.....
I'm so excited Allegra Goodman has a new book coming out soon!

I read this before I was a 'Goodreads' member ---It was 'GREAT'!

Ann says

I honestly could not put this book down. I must have been up most of the night reading it, to the annoyance of my husband. When I finished I gave it to him and then he understood. I love Allegra Goodman, but this is far and away her best. An astonishing portrayal of a world so close and yet so far apart; an even more astonishing portrayal of characters so real I felt I might meet them at any moment.

jo says

i'm astounded that this is a first novel. i'm astounded that, while writing a first novel, allegra goodman didn't feel any pressure to thicken the plot and jack up the sentimentality. i'm astounded that she chose as the topic

of her first novel a strict orthodox community in which nothing much happens except the tiny movements that make up life for most of us most days. and i'm astounded that so many people read and loved this novel.

this seems such a non-commercial novel. there is no glossary at the end, so if your knowledge of hebrew or yiddish or whatever is as pathetic as mine, well, tough. and really, nothing happens, except, as i said, life. the little things that make us happy and make us miserable. being fourteen and losing your best friend. being thirty and wanting more without knowing what more is. being an old man whose children have irreparably disappointed you, in spite of the fact that they are solid, good people. losing worlds with the change of the seasons. finding new worlds in a serendipitous and unmomentous encounter. experimenting with life. dying. being born. fashioning happiness out of food, walks, and other people. above all, spending a whole lot of time and energy retooling your relationship with your spouse, children, parents, friends; fine-tuning the infinitely complex knowing that you'll never really get it; giving it your best shot; taking failure and mediocrity with grace.

i don't know how you do it, allegra goodman, but seriously: you are my hero.

Erika Dreifus says

I *loved* this book. Just posted a review over on the Fig Tree Books blog, for a series spotlighting past winners of the Edward Lewis Wallant Award: <http://bit.ly/2qzRBoS>.

Carla says

Allegra Goodman invites the reader into a self-contained Orthodox summer community in the Adirondacks. This is a quiet novel that involves you in a special sect devoted to its ancient Rabbi and literal interpretations of the Torah. I learned a great deal about Jewish ritual and esoteric holidays. However, the heart of the novel is found within the individual characters and their different adaptations to the community and its ideals. I liked the author's respect for her characters and her appreciation of the strength of their commitment even as she explores some underlying stresses.

Anna says

This book actually contains some really beautiful writing. So why 2 stars? I just couldn't connect with the characters. Honestly, I felt a little overwhelmed by the number of them and couldn't seem to keep them straight. An earlier reviewer said the book was slow to start... I must agree. I forced myself to keep going. The beautiful writing is the reason it got two stars from me. It is too bad... I had high hopes.

Liz green says

I agree with Brecken in that Kaaterskill Falls is slow starting, mostly due to an over abundance of characters, which is also its greatest weakness. It is difficult to connect to the characters, and while they each have different motivations and characteristics they do not seem to become individuals. The strength of the novel is

in its intriguing themes: community, obedience, dedication, abuse of power, the word, trials of faith, comparing self to others, and family. There are beautiful passages, and interesting conflict.

Kate says

I LOVED this book and was very sad when it came to an end. I read Intuition by Allegra Goodman first. Two very different reads. While I liked Intuition well enough, I liked this one even better because of Goodman's arrow-sharp read of her characters' thoughts and feelings. I love a book that delves into the characters' inner lives, but with restraint and precision. I'm not clearly explaining why I liked this book so very much, but I highly recommend it.

LM says

This was just lovely. Every summer, Brooklyn empties as many of the Jews in my community go upstate to bungalow colonies for the summer. Having only been to two colonies as a guest I can best describe these places as Camp Mather family camp near Yosemite, except of course more orthodox, and totally different. Anyway this book is set in the mid '70's and centers around the members of a colony or camp. In Kaaterskill Falls though the members are not all religious or religious in the same way as colonies seem to be now a days. There is a more modern Sephardic family, Rav Kirschner followers from NYC's Washington Heights, reform/conservatives, and non Jewish, year long residents of the town are included. This is very well written and I was only annoyed a bit when the author seemed to victimize a character who knowingly made a decision that would cause a particular consequence.
