

# Crash

In this comic novel, a man blames himself for the car accident that paralyzed his wife.

BY JINCY WILLETT

“ALL is suffering,” say the Buddhists, but all is not tragic. Some is downright comical, as Caroline Adderson demonstrates in her second novel, “Sitting Practice,” in which a good man marries the love of his life and permanently disables her in a dumb automobile accident. His wry and sensible wife, now unable to walk, is game to wheel her way through life’s rich pageant, but self-blame paralyzes the husband and threatens the marriage. None of this should be amusing — except when it’s played out by Adderson’s surprising, generously realized characters.

Ross, a chubby, charming movie caterer in Hollywood North (Vancouver, British Columbia) recovering from minor nasal surgery, falls instantly and deeply in love with Iliana, the outpatient nurse who

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*Jincy Willett’s latest novel, “The Writing Class,” will be published next month.*

tweezes the packing out of his left nostril. Ross is no stoic. “I must not bleed,” he warns her. “She laughed. Like everyone else, she seemed to think he was kidding. ... She didn’t know Ross’s character then, of course, how woozily affectionate he was, particularly toward society’s most vulnerable: has-been American actresses, the elderly, babies (especially babies). He was a softie; a finger poked in anywhere

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#### SITTING PRACTICE

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on him would sink to the second knuckle.”

After the accident, Ross loses weight but remains a softie, transformed by the need to atone and by awe at his wife’s resilience. Though till now he has prided himself on being “unteachable,” he begins what he imagines as his journey toward redemption, struggling through his

first “walking meditation” at a Buddhist retreat. Initially repulsed by the sight of experienced walkers, who plod like extras from “Night of the Living Dead,” he finds himself momentarily too self-conscious to move. But when Ross finally takes a step, he learns “there is a difference between what we’re doing and what we think we’re doing. Between real life and the life we think we’re living.”

He becomes a Buddhist, stops eating meat, sells his business and moves to Vancouver Island, opening a vegetarian cafe where he and his wife can work together. He dedicates his life to her. The place is idyllic, but Iliana, now an object of reverence rather than passion, is restless. For one thing, to be revered is a lonely business; for another, she’s still a sexual being: “Sensory perception below the waist had been cut off and, to compensate, had intensified in other places. All her pleasure receptors migrated upward. ... She only had to draw a fingernail down her throat to cause herself to shiver.” Ross,

hammered by guilt, distracted by all his atonement projects, doesn’t see her. Someone else does.

Ross and Iliana are fine characters, many-layered and unpredictable. And so is Bonnie, Ross’s twin sister. The emotional opposite of her brother, all darkness to his light, she’s the only character who treats Iliana the same way after the accident as she did before. She’s a silly person, a therapeutic narcissist.

All of Adderson’s characters are rounded and all have utility, not simply as plot devices but as parts of a striving, suffering whole. For them, slapstick and catastrophe are two faces of the same coin, as even that terrible accident makes plain: a yellow tennis ball vanishes in a smash, wedged into the racquet handle, delighting the players; later it rolls beneath a brake pedal, profoundly altering their lives.

As Ross and Iliana separately learn, empathy has its limits. Sometimes, confronted with pain not your own, you should stop trying to feel it and just see it plain. □