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In Troubled Waters
By Beverly Coyle
Ticknor & Fields

Fifth-generation Floridian Beverly Coyle's 1990 novel-in-stories *The Kneeling Bus* proved so impressive a debut that critics grew rhapsodic in its praise. The only question was, would Coyle's glowing promise cast wider light or expire.

Her profoundly moving new novel *In Troubled Waters* answers that question: Coyle is beyond question a major talent.

Set in Central Florida, where the sunlight cuts deep enough to illuminate our darkest motives, the book follows the final days of ornery 91 year old Tom Glover. These last, challenging days show him that "history never repeats itself, it just rhymes."

Glover has never learned a vocabulary for love. Having been a crabby husband and remote father, he faced a lonely old age before his 69 year old daughter Lois moved back to his ancestral home with her husband, Paul, a kindly soul unravelling in the middle stages of Alzheimer's disease. This provides Glover with purpose. He keeps an eye on Paul while Lois does her best to care for them both. But when Glover hires a black teenager to take Paul fishing, he alienates the now suburban yuppie neighborhood that wears its bigotry not loud but deep.

They wear designer clothes now instead of sheets and call themselves Neighborhood Watch rather than the Klan, but Glover's seen these neighbors before. Their racism, and his, lie at the heart of a guilt that's haunted Glover most of his life: his silent complicity in the dehumanizing of a black childhood companion. By now defending Paul and his young fishing partner, Glover finds at last a chance to atone for a lifetime of failure at commitment.

While the characters within Coyle's focus are few, she explores them with extraordinary compassion and depth. This becomes not only the story of Glover's quest for peace and penance but of Lois and Paul's struggle with a heartbreaking disease that saps the strength of one and the mind of the other. It would be hard to find a more sympathetic portrait of nurturing devotion than Lois, tending the various needs of her father, husband and nine-year-old grandson Petey.

Paul, who can remember thoughtfulness but not thoughts, his mind increasingly full of gaps and ellipses, is no longer the man Lois married: "In the middle stage the victims made love and then asked you who you were and where was his wife." Each time Paul reaches a new stage of loss and disorientation, Lois thinks this must be the worst, until it gets worse.

But she grows to feel a deeper kind of love for him, for what he brings out in her as she, like her father, is enjoined in battle: "She was prepared to die for Paul.... It was this discovery about herself for which she almost wanted to thank someone." As he wanders around their home, periodically urging Lois to take him home, she comes to realize what "home" means: "She felt something of the funny rightness and logic of it.... From now on she'd take Paul home anytime he wanted. And when he got there, she'd try to take him in."

In prose fresh as new leaves, Coyle (who spent her early literary life as Wallace Stevens scholar) displays a poet's gift for making her words serve many tasks at once. On the very first page, showing Glover watching young boys on his property, Coyle describes the scene, captures the fashion of our times and characterizes Glover all in one sentence: "They wore clothes that lit up at twilight—bright Gap clothes whose colors were too bold, too recent, for the old man's weak heart."

Coyle unmask's humanity's eternal practice of creating ties to an "us" by erecting walls of distrust against a "them". She shows how walls rise even within the most elemental "us" group, the family, and how we can scale those walls only if we learn to express love before time runs out. Her charitable yet unsentimental eye lays bare a spectrum of human hearts from ages nine to 91, taking us so far into these characters that *they* enter *us*. Coyle's depth, artfulness and wisdom range so wide that finally it is in the sheer multiplicity of its virtues that this novel's magic lies.