



Sweet Hereafter: A Novel

By Russell Banks

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Atom Egoyan's Oscar-nominated *The Sweet Hereafter* is a good movie, remarkably faithful to the spirit of Russell Banks's novel of the same name, but Banks's book is twice as good. With the cool logic of accreting snowflakes, his prose builds a world--a small U.S. town near Canada--and peoples it with four vivid, sensitive souls linked by a school-bus tragedy: the bus driver; the widowed Vietnam vet who was driving behind the bus, waving at his kids, when it went off the road; the perpetually peeved negligence lawyer who tries to shape the victims' heartaches into a winning case; and the beauty-queen cheerleader crippled by the crash, whose testimony will determine everyone's fate.

We experience the story from inside the heads of the four characters in turn--each knowing things the others don't, each misunderstanding the facts in his or her own way. The method resembles Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Gilbert Sorrentino's stunning *Aberration of Starlight*, but Banks's achievement is most comparable to John Updike's tales of ordinary small-townners preternaturally gifted with slangy eloquence, psychological insights, and alertness to life's tiniest details.

Egoyan's film is haunting but vague--it leaves viewers in the dark regarding several critical plot points. Banks's book is more haunting still, and precise, making every revelation count, with a finale far superior to that of the film. It's also wittier than the too-sober flick: the lawyer dismisses the dome-dwelling hippie parents of one of the crash victims as being "lost in their Zen Little Indians fantasy," which casts a sharp light on them and him, too. He's lost in his calculations of how each parent will fit into the legal system, and the ways in which he fits into the tragedy are lost on him. If only he and the Vietnam-vet dad could read each other's account of their tense first encounter, both of them might get what the other is missing.

Banks's wit is pitiless--it's painful when we discover that the bus driver, who prides herself on interpreting for her stroke-impaired husband, is translating his wise but garbled observations all wrong. The crash turns out not to be the ultimate tragedy: in the cold northern light of its aftermath, we discover that we're all in this alone.

From Publishers Weekly

Banks employs a series of narrators to present a powerful account of an Adirondack community riven by a bus accident that claims 14 children. A Literary Guild alternate in cloth.

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From Library Journal

One snowy morning in the small town of Sam Dent in upstate New York, a school bus careens into a frozen stream, killing 14 children. *The Sweet Hereafter* examines the aftereffects of this accident through the eyes of four narrators: the driver of the bus, a parent devastated by the loss of two children, an opportunistic big-city lawyer, and a permanently crippled teenager who survived the crash. Grief and an obsessive need to assign blame draw the townspeople together; all too quickly the focus shifts from what they have lost to how much they stand to collect in insurance settlements. Banks, who along with Raymond Carver, Ernest Herbert, and a handful of other writers has revived the genre of working-class fiction in the last decade, is uncharacteristically heavy-handed in extracting a moral from these proceedings. Not up to the high standard set by *Continental Drift* (LJ 4/15/85). Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 5/15/91.

- Edward B. St. John, Loyola Law Sch. Lib., Los Angeles

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Teresa Hunter:

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John Mallery:

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Kathleen Jones:

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Terry Hollis:

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