



Midheaven • finalist for the [Ernest Hemingway Award](#) for best first- published novel.

Chair of the selection committee, Anne Tyler wrote, "The pace, clarity and assurance of *Midheaven* made it a pleasure to read."

From Kirkus Reviews: "Kuhlken has, with Jodi, created a character new to us--the born again adolescent who's in-the-know--and he provides her with grit and honesty."

Midheaven

MY NAME IS JODI. I live alone now on the western slope of the Carson Range, five miles up the mountain from the highway between Incline and South Tahoe. Each morning I climb the hill and watch the tour boat make its turn toward Emerald Bay. It cuts a wake through the choppy water, surrounds itself in foam and sets a straight course southwest toward the peaks they call Desolation. There the snow has stayed all summer, a dozen shades of red when sunset meets the fog from the lake. It will be there AM in the last days, when the earth is scorched and the fivers boil. And halfway up Mt. Tallac is a cross of snow all through the year.

Charley's dad built this cabin where I stay to hide, cramped between the hill, two mossy boulders and a row of second growth fir. Vines and manzanita from the hillside cover the roof, drape the southern window, which looks out on the meadow, and take second root between the granite stones in the path around the cabin. So far no one has found me here but chipmunks, mosquitoes, butterflies, a doe and Charley.

The cabin is split pine and fir logs and scrap boards which Charley's dad (Walker we call him -- I'm not even sure if Charley knows his first name) salvaged and dragged up the mountain. It has a loft in one end where I sleep. In daylight I draw a tarp over the window so no one who might pass on the creek road can see its reflection. The land is Toiyabe National Forest, but loggers have been here; the big trees were cut years ago all the way up to Marlette Lake, and the road has washes and fallen stumps that only hikers can cross. No one will find me here unless I meet him at the road.

A cast-iron stove and a mat on crates and plywood fill the end of the cabin near the door, opposite the loft. It's a small cabin, fifteen feet long and ten feet wide. The floor is bare split pine with splinters still, and the cracks in the walls have never been caulked. I fill them with rags and socks and cardboard, but the wind always finds more. There is a full-length mirror on the north wall. I don't know how Walker brought it up here, or why. In the evenings I sit by the stove and stare at the mirror. Once, boys thought I was pretty. My legs are long and my eyes are large and nearly black, so people used to watch them and not notice that my nose is too thin and curls up too much at the end, that my lips are flat and wide and there is a gap between my two front teeth, which makes me afraid to smile. I used to be tan but now I'm just dark; my skin is cracked and dirty and I never comb my hair. I should cut it off. Fm very ugly, but I don't care. No one will come up to see me but Charley.

The day I came up in June I thought Charley was following me. I hitched a ride out of King's Beach

with a man who said I seemed disturbed because I couldn't sit still or keep my hands from my eyes; he offered to share his bed. I told him I'd scream, and when I did he dropped me at Sand Harbor. On the first ridge I looked back because I thought I heard Charley's voice, but I couldn't see him, so I kneeled in the dew to watch children hopping from campers and dashing across the asphalt to the beach while drivers slammed their brakes and lay on their horns, and I cried because I was grown up and had no faith, no family, nothing.

Up the road I thought I had lost him. I busied myself with remembering other days I had made the climb and watching rustling bushes for deer or stray dogs. Then I wondered if the rustling might be Charley; I cussed him and threw stones till I felt foolish, as though there were a crowd watching. Then I stopped still, covered my eyes. It was at one of those times I first heard a screech from far up the mountain, then a whine like the wind through a tunnel, only quivering, like the falsetto of a human voice. I watched for a squirrel to perk up its ears or for birds to stop flying and look back, but only I seemed to hear it. I scrambled up toward the voice as if it came from the end of a rainbow, ran too fast and staggered, tripping in ruts and scraping my arms and hands, wiping the blood from my forehead so it mixed with sweat and dripped into my eyes. A motor sputtered behind me. I slid down a bank to hide. A trail bike skidded around a corner, spun, then righted and blasted back down the road.

At the edge of the stream where I stopped to drink was a bird with one wing unhinged in the water. I had never seen such a bird before, the size of a large hawk, with white wings and a golden belly. A bloody groove parted its head, its eyes were crossed and its beak spread wide as if in a gasp. I ran from it, buried myself in high grass and pounded my fists in the mud. Still I was sure Charley was watching me from the trees or was already ahead, knowing where I'd go.

"Kill me, Charley!" I screamed. "Please kill me! You've killed people before! I don't believe it's hard!" I waited, so tensed and silent I heard insects splash in the stream, but Charley didn't come. No Charley, no Phillip, no Jesus anymore. Evil circled above me, vultures behind the trees; it lay hard beneath me, the hard earth, and I prayed to the God I didn't believe in anymore, for hours, till the sun was straight above.

Then I climbed dizzily, giddy, and by instinct I made the right turns. I tore into the cabin, exhilarated as with a second wind, alone, really alone for the first time ever, as different from being away from home as thinking is different from believing; and I promised myself to cast off everyone. I was heartless and proud. I swept the floor and shook out the blankets, dragged the mattress out to air, scraped the windows and washed them with a bucket of water from the creek. Charley came just before dark.

He found me in a corner of the loft, curled up and facing the wall. "'Go away, Charley,'" I whispered.

He climbed up and reached for my hand but I jerked it back. "I looked all over for you," he said. "Down at the pier, your folks" place, Hidden Beach, the hot springs, even at the church. I knew you'd be up here but I didn't want to think it. It's not the right place. Too much happened here."

"I knew you'd be right behind me, Charley. I can't ever get rid of you, you or Paul or my dad. Poor precious Jodi needs a man. You hang on like ticks but you can't change a damned thing!"

He backed away, hung his legs off the loft, threw his boots tenderly at the far wall. "'I can go down if that's what you want. I just brought food and some of your clothes.'"

"Well, you didn't have to come," I said. "'I can do all fight by myself.'"

"Sure you can, Jodi. You can sit up here and think all summer. That's just what you need, lots of time to think. And you can run in those same jeans, eat bark, kill deer when they come down to the creek. If that's what you want."

Charley stayed on. He hung shelves, cleared brush for a path to the dam he built upstream. He gathered logs and kindling, transplanted wild bulbs to a garden by the door where he said they would bloom next spring. Every few days he went down the mountain; in Incline he slipped into my folks'

house when they were gone, took my sweaters and jeans, pajamas and ski caps and warm socks; in King-s Beach he sold what he could for money to buy me books and writing tablets and tubes of oil paints and canvases, to stock the shelves with canned food and corn meal and peanut butter and dried everything. I didn't thank him; I snubbed him and ignored him and pouted and moped in the cabin while he tried to talk me into climbing trees so we could sit on branches like we used to do, squealing noises we pretended would call bears or elephants or whatever I wanted. Some days I walked off alone, but never far from the cabin, not to explore or think, not even to cry, just to remember Phillip and how they destroyed him, so I could keep on hating.

Charley built a platform in a fir on the ridge from where we could see the lake, matted the boards with dry grass and sat there at dusk after he finished working, picking off pine cones with a slingshot and calling for me to come up, but I never would. He said that he told my folks I had gone to Mexico with the Children of God and asked me to write a letter to tell them I was O.K. I told him to go to hell, that I didn't need his suggestions.

Now the aspens in the grove upstream have begun to turn and the last wild flowers, mouse-ears and monkshoods, have wilted. The hummingbirds left the creek in the meadow a few days ago and only a few butterflies stay on. The chipmunk with a broken and dragging tail, who used to follow behind and nibble while I picked wild mint, left or died. The flies and mosquitoes are dying, the crickets sing softer and farther down the mountain and the wind wakes me in the mornings. Nights fall earlier, I sleep later, the mountain prepares for winter and I get lonelier every day.

I drop the tarp over the window each morning; then I make oatmeal or millet and coffee and sit on the bank to eat before I go down to the creek. I wash my face in the creek and clean dishes or draw faces in the mud; then I turn back to the cabin and try to read the books, but the words jump out, dive away, and nothing means anything. I make tea and climb the hill, sit on the bench in the outhouse and watch the sailboats tack along the shore around Dollar's Point, leaning toward the public beach and the pier. I can't see the pier, and the boats all turn back west from the cove, on their holiday.

In the afternoons I stay in the cabin and sketch landscapes in charcoals, always of the lake, the hotels, the highway, the western peaks behind and above, shaded by faces in the clouds. I wad up my sketches to start the evening fire. Or I hike up the mountain and shout for echoes. At night I sweat by the fire and read my journals if the words stay still, until they exhaust me. In my sleep I'm plagued by nightmares, and sometimes I wake up in the meadow.

Charley lives in King's Beach again. All week he works with Pancho building block walls, and on Saturdays he always comes up, brings what I need and asks what I've done. I tell him what I can remember, which isn't much, because most every day is the same. Fin not angry with him anymore; I've become kind enough to forgive the one person who has proven that he cares for me no matter what I've done and will do. But when he asks me to go back down with him, I scream at him to leave and call him names even though he's my only friend.

I'm only eighteen years old; six months ago I was still a girl. I'd go back if I could. I'd run back home before the snows come and my father would pet me and hold me so tight that I'd cry till the pain was gone, till I believed he loved me again and had hurt enough to be terribly sorry. Then I'd dress up warm and run down to the beach by the marina, skip stones on the lake and dig channels for the tiny waves to run up. At dark I'd climb the road and we'd all watch television or play cards while my mom painted. At bedtime I'd kiss my mom and dad good night, my brothers, too, and Charley if he was over, then curl up in clean sheets with flowers, watch the shadows of branches on the ceiling and wait for tomorrow, when I could take my dog Sherlock on a picnic by a fishing stream above Emerald Bay.

When I wake up at nights I try to remember my dreams so I can guess what they mean, decide what to do, how and what to think about to keep myself well. But usually all I can recall is the feeling,

revulsion and nausea, when the nights are cold. Winter is coming. I don't believe I can make it through the winter.

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