



“Book Review: *Balsamic Moon*”

Reviewed by Joelene Pynnonen



In the face of disaster, two near strangers must rely on one another to survive.

It's nearing the end of August, and New Orleans is gearing up for a storm. Off the Gulf Coast, Katrina has grown into a Category Five hurricane, the highest and most dangerous level. While many residents pack up and leave to avoid the impending catastrophe, others stay behind.



Doreen Williams is used to wild weather. This storm, she figures, won't be any worse than the ones that have come before. It might teeter off and miss New Orleans altogether. Her house is on high ground, and she doesn't have the money to spend on hotels every time a storm blows up.

Her neighbor, Richard Girard, doesn't want to leave his house either. He's clung to it since his mother died, rarely setting foot outside even in ordinary circumstances. The thought of losing it and his cherished belongings keeps him from evacuating.

Although they've been neighbors since Doreen moved into the street years ago, Richard and Doreen have barely exchanged a handful of words. Doreen has a busy-enough life and Richard has always been known as the neighborhood oddball and regarded with suspicion. As the storm rips through their carefully ordered lives, though, it becomes clear that they're going to have to rely on each other if they have a hope of surviving.

Most disaster novels I've read follow similar conventions to disaster movies: more action than reality. *Balsamic Moon* breaks that mold. It's a thoughtful, nuanced, and authentic exploration of the occurrence and direct aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina. The long days of waiting, the stifling anxiety about whether they'll be rescued, and the dwindling of already meager rations are all drawn with stark clarity. Something about the way *Balsamic Moon* is written pulls readers smoothly across its pages. It's easy to empathize with the characters through the struggle for survival. The heat of the long days is palpable, the stench of the floodwater equally so.

While *Balsamic Moon* uses Hurricane Katrina as a vehicle for its story, the story isn't really about the storm. There are so many different things that this novel explores, but, at its heart, I think it is about the people that society accepts and the people it rejects. As a gay man, Richard is used to being treated with distrust. Since becoming a recluse in the wake of his mother's death, his neighbors are more prone to be wary of him. As his backstory unravels, it becomes clear how wrong his neighbors are about him. Doreen, too, has experienced rejection through her life as a Black woman living in a predominantly white area. The interactions these characters have builds a multi-faceted view of privilege, isolation, friendship, and what it means to be part of a community.



Reading *Balsamic Moon* is somehow both wonderful and heartrending. I could easily have spent more time with these characters. There seems to be so much of both of them left unexplored. It feels fitting, though, that in the wake of this disaster things are left messy and incomplete. It leaves an air of disturbance around the novel. A feeling of disquiet that somehow mirrors the ultimate atmosphere of the book.