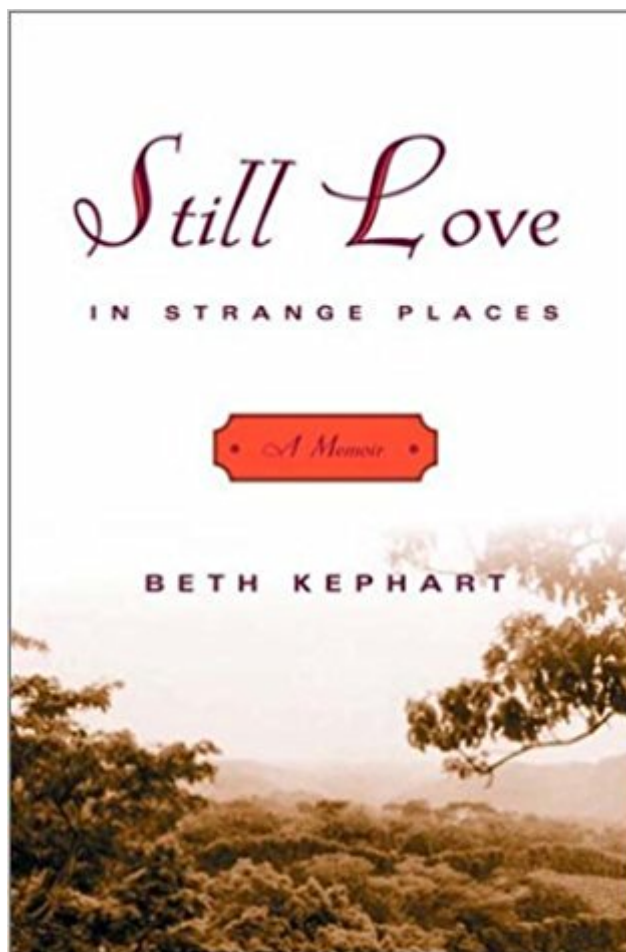


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Still Love In Strange Places: A Memoir



Synopsis

When Beth Kephart met and fell in love with the artist who would become her husband, she had little knowledge of the place he came from - an exotic coffee farm high in the jungle hills of El Salvador, a place of terrifying myths and even more frightening realities, of civil war and devastating earthquakes. Yet love, she finds, means accepting not only the stranger who is one's lover but also the stranger's history - in this case, a country, language, people and culture utterly foreign to a young American woman. Kephart's transcendentally lyrical prose has already made her a finalist for the American National Book Award. In this new work, illuminated with her own photographs, she offers her testament to the ties that bind: the love, by choice, of a man, and the love, by necessity, of his homeland.

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Customer Reviews

"It is an anxious earth they live on," Kephart (*A Slant of Sun*) concludes, describing the El Salvador she's come to know by marrying one of its sons. It is a land born of massive geological movements (due to "conspiratorial lithospheric plates") and equally troubling ethno-political upheavals, from the Mayans to the Nahuatls and the Spanish to the modern-day oligarchs. Kephart sees herself as white-bread American, blandness personified, going to El Salvador in search of her husband's wild stories, ostensibly to pass them on to their son but, more fundamentally, to feel at home in her husband's home. It's a risky proposition, but Kephart realizes that listening requires "trying to forget who you are and what you think you need to know so that you can be... inside the church of another's memories." So she perseveres, and pieces come together, just as the Spanish language,

initially "a gaggle of indivisible birds" starts making sense to her gringo ears. Kephart's eye for detail is extraordinary: she depicts the local cemetery as resembling the "aftermath of a piñata party." While basically enthusiastic, Kephart does have moments of self-doubt. Why is she so interested in her husband's stories, but no one's interested in her own quiet past? Should her husband's family's workers really be considered "dear friends," beneficiaries of the family's noblesse oblige, while other peasants are clearly the victims of upper-class greed? Anyone who has ever loved an outsider and tried to make it work by embracing that otherness will find great resonance in this beautiful, heartfelt memoir. Photos. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

As a writer, Kephart has moved from love of her child (*A Slant of Sun*) to love of friends (*Into the Tangle of Friendship*) to love of her husband, whose Salvadoran background she explores here. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The way I see this evocative and quite heroic book is this: This is a beautiful journey not only to another place, but it's a story, really about a brave, sensitive, shy writer, who happens to be an impassioned mother and wife who is trying to figure out how to understand her (the) new American Family, of which she is a wonderful chronicler. This is an epic adventure, really, but not just to an exotic place but deep inside of what it means to be in a family in America in 2002. The very idea of family is radically different than just a few years ago. Kephardt had a longer way to go than most of us to understand where she fit in, where her family came from, and how she could cope with and understand it. What an admirable trip and what a lucky family to have her. This book is quite relevant to anybody who loves anybody and is frightened of their enormous responsibilities therein. It's a monument of the bravery of those rare spouses, moms, sisters who just won't ever quit on the people they love. The fact that it's beautifully written, and very evocative is a huge bonus. She is bright, funny, and unsparingly honest about herself. This is a big, rare and great work. Honest.

Beth Kephart writes with enormous talent and careful lyricism about her discovery of El Salvador through the eyes of her husband, who will always be a native of that country although he lives in the USA. At first it is almost like entering a dream to be swept up in this unfolding tale, but the drama of a country as embattled as El Salvador--and the drama of the people who live there--make it far more urgent than any dream. And this book also slowly makes so clear the fact that when you love someone and commit yourself to another person you are taking on that person's history and upbringing. This is a wonderful book.

A beautiful book and well-written. It is for the type of reader who enjoys getting into the hearts and minds of both the writer and the people about whom he or she is writing. Books such as this require the reader to think--Kephart does a great job bringing her readers with her. Also, Ms Montgomery (see her review) also does a great job in communicating the essence of Kephart's book--but then Montgomery is a great writer too!!

Ms. Kephart cultivates a beautiful phrase, and the dust from the roads of El Salvador rises around your feet, the heat from the sun blanches the branches of the coffee trees and reddens the berries, and Ms. Kephart, her heart often as vulnerable as the berries on the trees of her husband's family farm, shares the honest and sometimes fearful adventure of forging a bond with him and his family. Love is not always easy to capture and pin down and Ms. Kephart is wise enough to only try to surround it with a billowing net of words.

This was the most surprising and beautiful book I have read this year. It is a poem, a watercolor, a dream half-remembered upon waking, a world rebuilt. You will be swept away, and it will stay in your heart for a long time. In stunning words, Beth Kephart writes of a coffee farm where her husband grew up in the jungled hills of El Salvador. It is a farm inhabited by souls living, mythical and dead: here among the dusty roads, crowded graveyards, and lush coffee plantations we meet ghosts of 11th century Indians, Siguanaba (the witch who haunts the doomed) and especially Don Alberto, her husband's beloved and legendary grandfather, who founded the coffee farm and died there "anchored into the hands of those he loved and into the memories of others." This book is a testament to memory, and to the endurance of our deeds. It is a book about a beautiful and fecund land lacerated by earthquakes, snipers, and greed. It is a dramatic book by a brave woman about an exotic place, but it is a book that speaks to all of us about what holds the world together: memory, family, courage, love. Read it, and give it to the people who matter most to you. This is a brilliant work.

A memoir of a woman's attempt to understand the history and culture that shaped her El Salvadorian husband. She wants to make herself part of his early life and to be able to pass this culture on to their son. While she provides a good basic introduction to El Salvador, including history, the economy, and geology, her search for understanding seems half-hearted. As an engaging portrait of her life or of the people of El Salvador, it's disappointing. However, there is not

a lot of information out there on this country, so those planning to travel there might find some of the descriptions interesting.

Beth Kephart's *Still Love In Strange Places* is a poignant, loving tale of her learning to love the people, the land and the country she married into-El Salvador. It puts this extraordinary place, with a painfully sad history and a future that speaks of reemergence in a much bigger, more poetic context. I felt for her and the real people she brought to life. Makes you want to come here as I have just done. Mark Monchek

Still Love in Strange Places takes readers on an exquisite journey to a foreign place (El Salvador) and also deep into the heart of a marriage, into questions of identity and place. Kephart is really asking the questions, To whom do memories and stories belong? and How are cultural legacies passed down to a child. A fascinating book.

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