

# A doctor's journey on a ship of fools

## "Swan Song; An Odyssey"

Lisa Alther  
Alfred Knopf, 2020.

Jessie Drake, an emergency room doctor in her mid-60s, has been present at the deaths of her father, her mother, and her longtime lover Kat—all in the last two years. Musing uneasily over these losses one evening in her Burlington condo, she looks out the window and sees a corpse floating near the shore. After she dials 911, her imagination goes into overdrive and she fears she's a "magnet of death." To escape her grief and her fantasies, she wonders if she shouldn't get as far from Burlington as she can—and just at that moment she receives an offer from Ben Armstrong, a long-ago (male) lover, to join him as a doctor on the cruise ship *Amphitrite*. Jessie joins the ship in Hong Kong and stays on it as it steams across the South China Sea, through the Indian Ocean to the Gulf of Aden, then up the Red Sea, through the Suez Canal, across the Mediterranean, up the western coasts of Portugal, Spain and France to London, and finally across the Atlantic to New

York.

Alternately reflective, darkly satiric, and comic, the plot concerns Jessie and the people she alternately befriends and attends to on the cruise. At the center of the book is Jessie's reflection on her relationship with Kat, a well-known writer who kept a series of journals in which she jotted ideas, miscellaneous observations, and poetry she turned into each novel. Jessie has taken with her the last, unfinished journal, which contains, among other things, a poem entitled "Swan Song" that suggests distressingly that perhaps Kat had had a lover on the side. As Jessie spends long days pondering the poem's implications, the ship is threatened by impoverished Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden, and it rescues desperate Sudanese refugees in a

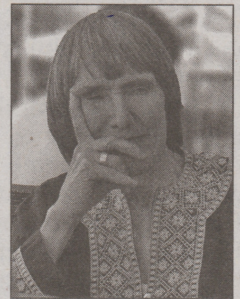
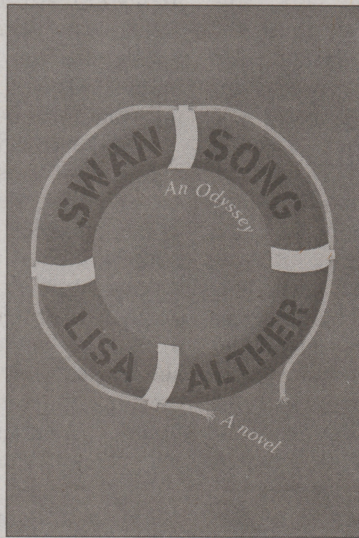
sinking inflatable boat near Malta. The contrast between the *Amphitrite*'s privileged journey and the world through which it travels offers further material for serious, if obvious, reflection.

The bulk of the book, however, is a darkly comic portrayal of the *Amphitrite*'s passengers, who are much more concerned with their own lives

than with the troubled world beyond the decks.

Among them is an elderly lady who is a permanent resident of the ship ("It's much more fun than assisted living," she assures Jessie, "and actually cheaper"). There is also the January-May marriage of the Savages: Charles, a WWII veteran and Gail, who "has the looks of a beauty queen turned trophy wife." Gail soon has the eye of every vulnerable man on the ship, from a suicidal golf pro, through the ex-priest whose job is to provide a dancing partner, to Drago, a Croatian crew member. The comic high-jinks on the high seas extend to Jessie's attraction to the ship's excellent singer, Mona—and Mona's attraction to Ben, who wishes to renew his affair with Jessie.

Alther makes fun of this present-day ship of fools without ever losing sight of the flip side of comedy. The novel isn't exactly an odyssey, and its darkness may discourage all but the most intrepid readers from taking a cruise (even when that's possible again), but it's a good read.



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