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Nice young ladies really shouldn't be dumping bodies at sea. But that isn't stopping Hazel Moran, and she still can't figure out why anyone thinks she's nice to begin with. Raised aboard a schooner and riding shotgun in her father's old 18-wheeler, there's little on the road or water that she can't handle; it's her people skills that need work. Normally that's not an issue – behind the wheel of a Kenworth most people tend to leave her alone. But when Hazel and her father become the targets of some unsavory characters hunting for her blue-haired cousin, their stolen tractor-trailer truck and a delivery that never arrived, she knows it's time to heed a lesson learned from her favorite hard-boiled paperbacks: playing nice will only end in tears.

For ten sweltering days Hazel navigates the Garden State's highways and shorelines, contending with a suspiciously wealthy stranger, white trash, Born Again, appliance salesmen, an unstable stalker and his curiously troublesome companion. It'll take all her ingenuity, not to mention some fishing tackle and high voltage, if Hazel hopes to protect her family and unravel this tangle of greed and betrayal. And anyone who gets too close, no matter their intent, will discover just how dangerous Hazel truly is as she sets in motion a twisted plan to uncover the truth, settle some scores, and if possible not wind up dead in the process.

Somewhat hard-boiled, slightly noir, *Last Exit in New Jersey* is an offbeat tale that travels from a Delaware Bay ghost-town to metropolitan north Jersey, where boats and big rigs set the scene for danger, suspense, dark humor and an unlikely bit of romance.

Last Exit In New Jersey Details

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Nenette says

It was a relief to finish this book. The title specifically mentioned that it was a thriller. I guess they had to do that because the reader wouldn't know otherwise. The whole book just seemed to drag forever!

Even with the big reveal at the end (which for me was this book's only redemption), I still felt that there were some bits and pieces of the story that got lost along the way; or probably it was too jumpy I was not really able to follow.

There is still a sequel, but I'm not bothering anymore.

Alysa H. says

I tried to read this book in fits and starts for well over a year, and just could not get into it. A few good characters and a well-developed setting, but SLOW SLOW SLOW. So slow. Not really worth the amount of time I had to put into it.

Wendy Hines says

Hazel Moran is only twenty years old, two weeks shy of her twenty-first birthday when she takes a long drive off of a short pier with her car. She tells her dad that someone was trying to kill her, but he tells her to stop lying; quit being so melodramatic.

So when a man in the shadows attacks Hazel while she is in her bunk on their schooner, she uses her sewing shears to protect herself. She wants to tell her dad she told him so, but is too traumatized to do so. Her dad takes care of the body in the hold, and that's that.

But it's only the beginning. Someone wants her cousin Micah in a bad way and will stop at nothing that heeds their way. If it's Hazel and her family, so be it. Hazel spends ten harrowing days dodging whoever wants her dead, but she can't figure out the who and they why.

Just when you think you figure out who you can trust and what's really happening, the story twists, reverses, and turns and you still don't know. Hazel is a solid and likable character, with her own strengths and weaknesses that lend credence to the story. A heart-thumping, thrilling page turner that will keep you guessing, *Last Exit to New Jersey* is a deftly blended thriller.

Anne (Booklady) Molinarolo says

What a good book! And darkly humorous too boot! Hazel made me laugh until my stomach hurt. And someone did try to hurt Hazel Moran, since she is out on the water with a dead guy on board. The dead guy

FINALLY convinced her father that someone tried to kill her when her Miata ended up in the drink. She feels bad that she killed the man, but it had to be done. Her cousin, Micah, is missing; so is the Morans' truck - *Intuition*. People are chasing Hazel and her Dad on land and sea. But why? And why did Micah steal her truck? Or was it someone else? Hazel decides to find out using her fictitious hero - Travis McGee - to find out. he's not worried. But the bad guys should be, Hazel is not a people person. She's lived with her dad on a small schooner and can shift the gears on an 18 wheeler fast. Oh yeah - she knows how to wield a very sharp knife, like Micah taught her.

Yes, Hazel has trust issues and she isn't good at listening to her father's instructions; but she does have a soft spot : animals and a burn-scared, brain scrambled boy that makes her heart go pitter-pat until it doesn't. Who is this boy? Who is Stevenson? What do they want and are they responsible for Micah's disappearance? Better watch out, Hazel is on the hunt for the bad guys!

Last Exit In New Jersey is a fast read that takes the reader on a wonderful ride. C.E. Grundler doesn't give any clues to what is going on and whom the bad guys really are until the last 80 pages. She has a dark sense of humor that comes out in Hazel, Micah, Zap, and Gary. I loved the characters and want to read more by this author.

Victoria Allman says

With the opening line of "Nice young ladies really shouldn't be dumping bodies at sea.", you really can't help but be pulled into the story of Hazel, a strong-willed, 20-year old who is searching for her cousin who is missing. Between the dead bodies of the guys who come after her, looking for something she doesn't have and trying to figure out who she can trust, she must protect her father. She is chased up and down the eastern coastline on a boat she captains and swerves around the corners of the New Jersey highway in a Viper. This is one cool 20-year old!

I bought this book because of the boating aspect and was immediately drawn into the suspense of it all. This is great writing!

The characters are intriguing and well-written. There is humility and humor in everyone--even the bad guys. But, with all the plot twists, it is hard to figure out who the bad guys are. This book will keep you guessing right up until the last chapter. It will capture you from page one and keep you hooked the whole way through.

This thriller is a must read that you won't be able to put down.

Victoria Allman
author of: SEAsoned: A Chef's Journey With Her Captain

Kenneth says

The problems I had with this book were:

- confusing as it jumped around a lot,
- led the reader throughout the entire book knowing that there is something you don't know but will learn at

the end. I prefer there being a surprising twist at the end, not a foreshadowed twist.

- the heroin was impulsive and resorted to violence immediately. I could not find myself to root for her very much.

With all that said, the ending was very good. I just wish it was easier to get to that point. It felt like the author had the ending thought up first the had to come up with a story to fit the ending.

Peregrins2 says

Great book with a sequel in the works! If you like heroines that are strong with hidden vulnerabilities, mysterious men, and boats, cars, and trucks you'll love this action thriller. I grew up where this book takes place, the author did as well. The settings are real, the boats and cars accurately described.

Alice Yeh says

The book begins with an introduction to a protagonist who, by all rights, should be wholly unlikeable. She is rude, egocentric, antisocial, judgmental, and more than a little bit of a sociopath. It is a great demonstration of Grundler's skill that the girl ended up drawing my compassion, as well as a begrudging sort of affection. Her character, in all its flawed glory, was revealed through the choices that she made, and I found myself caught between marveling at her MacGyver-esque skills and feeling completely awed by her presence of mind, laughing all the while at the inch-thick coat of snark that blankets her tongue.

The novel actually alternates between two points of view, flip-flopping from Hazel to Hammon and back again. At first, it was difficult to see how the parallel storylines were related, and I was annoyed by the constant passing of the baton because I wanted to find out where each one was going. When she dovetailed the two, however, everything came together seamlessly, and the importance of establishing personalities and histories became apparent. As the mystery unraveled, I was torn between blazing forward to see how it ends and going back to match recent revelations with past clues. The plot was complex, surprising, and at times confusing, but wholly enjoyable for those very reasons.

There is a fair amount of nautical-speak, as would be expected in a story about people who live on boats. Grundler successfully walks the line between authenticity and overkill; as a reader with very little sailing experience, I was still able to wade through the technical terms without becoming bogged down by them. They slipped in unobtrusively in the edgy, irony-ridden tone of voice that dominates the novel. My own real criticism would be a few typographical errors, but no glaring grammatical ones come to mind.

Last Exit In New Jersey is a lesson in balance — dramatics without implausibility; suspense sans gratuitous filler; and romance conveyed in half a handful of love scenes. In the end, reading this book is a lot like sailing aboard Hammond's boat, the Revenge: the pacing is efficiently done, even if part of you irrationally wishes it were a faster ride.

Ms.pegasus says

What do you get when you have too many red herrings? A: A messy kettle of fish.

Twenty year old Hazel Moran is introduced to us aboard the schooner Witch just after she has killed a man. The jarring part of the narrative, however, is that her father and his friend, Joe, are in the process of disposing of the body at sea, while Hazel replays the entire scene in her mind. This is a world of insularity; vigilante justice is acceptable and often preferred. Loyalty always trumps legality.

I had mixed feelings about LAST EXIT IN NEW JERSEY. The plot is a dense tangle of coincidence and unlikely maneuvering. The narrative alternates between two narratives, each in the first person, and the connection between the two felt overly delayed. Enormous detail is lavished on the many boats -- their construction, their movement, the arrangement of their space. Likewise cars and trucks -- their size, weight and handling -- are also key elements. They even have names like Tuition and Roadkill. Anyone interested in or familiar with New Jersey beyond the tri-state area or Atlantic City will also be drawn to this book. One character muses about a slogan to replace the "Garden State": "Welcome to New Jersey, now go home." The convergence of these disparate interests actually make this an appealing Book Club choice in that it will certainly draw comment from a variety of viewpoints. All of these features offer important color, and regrettably, none of them are areas of particular interest to me. It says a lot that I still felt drawn in. The strongest recommendation for this book is that Grundler introduces us to some fascinating characters. There is Micah, Hazel's stoner cousin. His protectiveness is touching given the swathe of dubious characters he mixes with. Joe is an employee whose secretive past hints at the capacity for danger, but he is more like both an uncle and a mentor to Hazel. Most distinctive of all, however, is Hazel. One would think that danger -- to herself and to her family -- would cause at least a moment of mind-numbing paralysis. Even when the facts are unclear, and the outcome is completely unpredictable, Hazel is guided by the instinct to react. I admired that total absence of emotional repression, that physical courage in her. Regardless of consequences, her impulsiveness is never inhibited.

LAST EXIT IN NEW JERSEY is the first in a series. An excerpt of the next book is included with this edition. I found the characters in this book intriguing, and hope that the succeeding books rely on that strength rather than convoluted and incredible plots.

Jean says

I'm surprised at how much I enjoyed this bargain for my Kindle. I'm from NJ, so the geography was very familiar, as well as the nautical terminology and environs. But the big surprise here is the excellent writing, and the characterizations, and the interesting characters! Nobody is a cliche here, and this is a really creative story. I can't recommend it enough if you're looking for something interesting.

Bridget says

I think C.E. Grundler writes like a house afire, and creates amazing characters. I hope to see much more from her. No-one else is writing books quite like this one. Hazel Moran is at the same time likable and just a bit crazy, especially when it comes to how to handle the mysterious people who are threatening her family and friends. Grundler handles the characters and their unfolding stories quite deftly, and with love. She will certainly be a top author in her field someday, or there's no justice.

What cost this book a star was that it really needed an edit to reduce the number of similar scenes. This

would allow the pace to pick up a bit where needed, and tell the story more smoothly. There were also proofreading and formatting issues that need to be addressed in order for a potentially great story to come through without distraction.

UPDATE: I've popped on an extra star for fear someone just flipping through might think I don't recommend this book for others. I most certainly do. My nitpicks should not detract from the fact that Ms Grundler has created something extraordinary in this book.

Sapan Vig says

Why didn't Hazel listen to her father? Why did her father treat her like a kid?

I feel I have wasted my time reading a book about a father and a daughter who didn't trust each other enough, which led to a lot of complications, and voila, this novel. I kept waiting till the end hoping for something to rescue these questions that kept haunting me. But, alas, I was hoping against hope. 2 stars because, at least, the writing is not all that bad. And I liked Micah's character.

Completely avoidable mess. Basics people!

Elizabeth says

There was not one character in this book I liked - or found realistic. Nothing that happened made any sense in terms of actual behavior. Strangely the story was still compelling just disappointing - an editor saying WAIT WHAT? A few times could have made this worth something.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

The Last Exit in New Jersey is an action packed story that deftly weaves unconventional characters into a darkly intriguing thriller.

Grundlers' intricate plot is tightly constructed as Hazel Moran finds herself caught in a deadly tangle of smugglers, thieves and killers. The story moves forward at a brisk pace with moments of brutal and explosive action as Hazel tries to evade the shadowy figures targeting her family while hunting for her missing cousin. The plot is intricately layered and while, if at times I was frustrated by the possibilities, I was never confused by the twisting threads of the premise. The author builds the connections between the seemingly disparate events and characters with care and skill. I thought the plot clever and challenging, requiring engagement with the characters and story.

I found the psychological disquiet of the characters the most compelling and unique aspect of the novel. It becomes clear as the story progresses that Hazel is an unusual heroine. Her motivations are transparent, but she has an edge of violence and instability that is disconcerting. Otto is obviously struggling with sanity and while his behaviour is consistently motivated by his obsession with Hazel/Annabelle, the potential for him to fall apart with spectacular consequences is always present. In regards to the other characters it's not always obvious whom means harm and whom means to help, and this contributes to the complexity and tension of the story.

Grundlers experience with trucking and boating in New Jersey gives her work authenticity, and her imagination provides for an original, entertaining thriller with fascinating characters. The Last Exit in New Jersey is a well written, impressive debut novel.

John says

I'm going to start by saying that I deducted a star for being a bit convoluted (confusing); I found myself having to stop in the final scenes to consciously sort out the folks who had appeared earlier. Moreover, it was a bit gory as well. Then again, I'm not much for thrillers, so perhaps this is normal and it's just me?

That having been said ... I really, really liked the book. Hazel and Hammon (Otto) make a truly compelling set of parallel protagonists, such that alternating between the two meant double the reading pleasure. Moreover, Grundler has created quite a bit of suspense of exactly *why*(the "villain") Stevenson is so interested in Hazel, as well as the backstory with him and Hammon. To round things out there's also Hammon's ... sidekick ... Annabel, who serves as a sort of Greek Chorus.

Definitely recommended!
