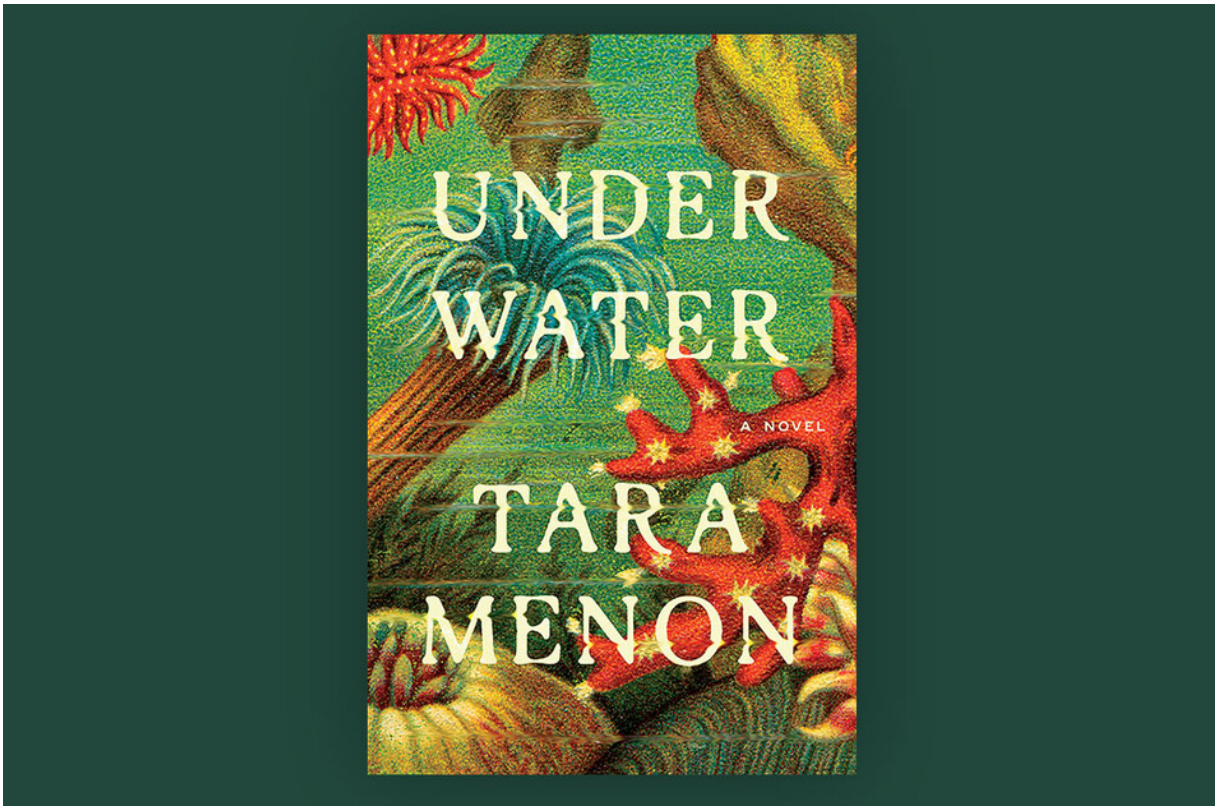
Books

Review: *Under Water*

By Tara Menon ’11CC.

By
Rebecca Shapiro
|
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Riverhead

It’s October 2012, the eve of Hurricane Sandy. But as her fellow New Yorkers are hunkering down to prepare for the “storm of the century,” Marissa, an editorial assistant at a luxury travel magazine, is wandering the city streets, thinking about the Skeleton Coast of Namibia — a place that is “exceptionally remote and dramatically beautiful,” but also littered with shipwrecks and whale bones, potent reminders of the dangers that can lurk even amid great beauty.

It’s something that Marissa knows all too well. The daughter of researchers studying manta ray reproduction, Marissa was raised after her mother’s death on a “tiny, uninhabited island in the Andaman Sea,” just across from the tourist playground of Phuket. On her first day of school, Marissa meets Arielle, and the two become inseparable — a friendship unlike any she has had before or since. During the week, the girls have their run of Arielle’s parents’ luxury Phuket hotel. But on the weekends, they return to Marissa’s island to roam freely, becoming “creatures of the sea.”

The book oscillates between this paradise and the jittery days before Sandy hits New York City. For Marissa, the impending hurricane isn’t just unsettling — it’s harrowing and unmooring, triggering in the truest sense of the word. In the smooth white slash across her stomach and the ghost she sees on every corner, Marissa bears the scars, both literal and emotional, of another storm: the 2004 tsunami, a disaster that in just minutes ravaged her world and took an unthinkable toll.

Menon ’11CC is a professor of English at Harvard, where she specializes in the novel, and her familiarity with the form is evident in this expertly constructed debut. In the book, when Marissa is asked if she lost any family in the tsunami, she doesn’t know how to answer. “I realized after a few years that there are people it is acceptable to mourn,” she says. “There is no place in our language for grief about friends, or love for them.” But with this book, a tender meditation on loss, Menon has created exactly that.

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