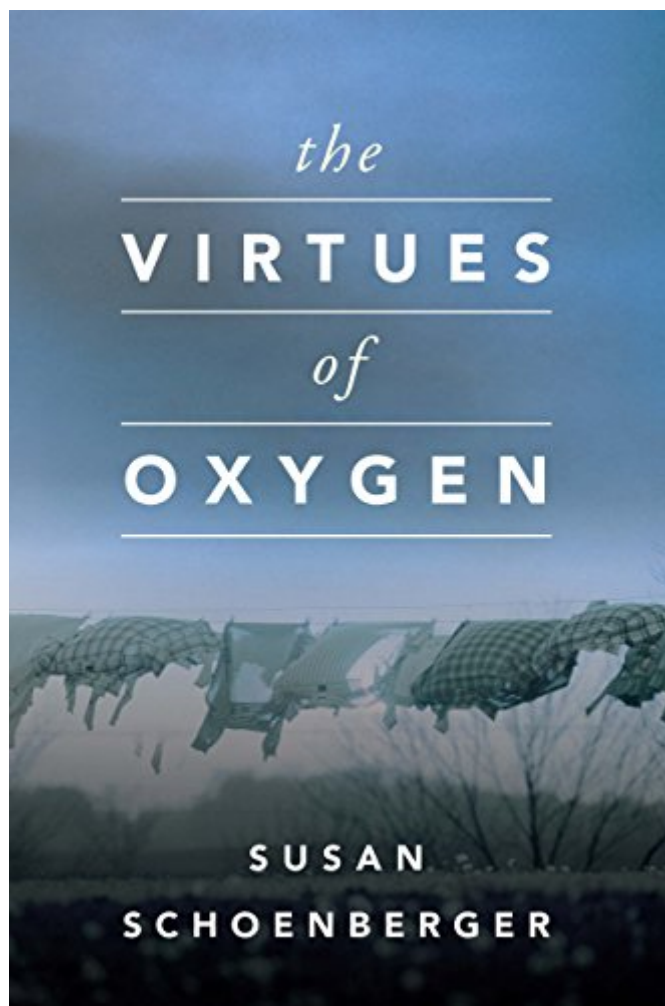




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The Virtues Of Oxygen



Synopsis

From the award-winning author of *A Watershed Year* comes a heartrending story of unlikely bonds made under dire straits. Holly is a young widow with two kids living in a ramshackle house in the same small town where she grew up wealthy. Now barely able to make ends meet editing the town's struggling newspaper, she manages to stay afloat with help from her family. Then her mother suffers a stroke, and Holly's world begins to completely fall apart. Vivian has lived an extraordinary life, despite the fact that she has been confined to an iron lung since contracting polio as a child. Her condition means she requires constant monitoring, and the close-knit community joins together to give her care and help keep her alive. As their town buckles under the weight of the Great Recession, Holly and Vivian, two very different women both touched by pain, forge an unlikely alliance that may just offer each an unexpected salvation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Virtues of Oxygen," by Susan Schoenberger, is a lovely character-driven novel about the importance of family, friendship, fortitude, support, and community. The book takes place in the small (fictional) town of Bertram Corners, in upstate New York, during the economic upheavals of the 2007/08 Great Recession. The book focuses on the lives of two very sympathetic,

compassionate, and likable main characters: Holly Showalter, a widow and single mother in her mid-forties, and Vivian Markham, a sixty-three-year-old polio survivor whose been living for the past fifty-seven years within the casket-like confines of an iron lung. Holly is one of an army of town folk who volunteer to help Vivian with the daily tasks of every day life. Also at the center of attention in this book is the town in which the two women reside. On one hand, it is your average American small town weathering the financial upheavals and major changes brought about by the Information Age, globalization, and the Great Recession; and on the other hand, it is an incredibly special town where the residents have come together in support of one of its most unique and vulnerable residents. Without the town's help, Vivian could not survive. But in the balance, it is perhaps the town that has gained the greatest good in the bargain. There was nothing particularly unusual about the events in this novel. What happens to Holly is the stuff of everyday life in these difficult financial times. The story unfolds over a few fall and winter months. It is a heartrending first-person narrative. You'll not be surprised at the type of crises that arise; naturally, all have to do with the inability to make ends meet. Holly's story is interesting and emotionally engaging, but perhaps all too predictable.

One of the things I liked about this story was how half the story (about Holly, a youngish mom of two boys who still misses her husband who died years ago, and who is struggling to make ends meet during the recession in the small but cozy town of Bertram Corners) centers on very current and easy-to-relate-to issues, and half the story (about Vivian, a 63-year-old woman who contracted polio at age 6 and has lived in an iron lung ever since) centers on interesting, sometimes terrifying issues that were prevalent in our nation's past (polio), and then how the story brings Vivian from that past into the current trends. It's quite well done, and I loved how Vivian copes and adapts to new technology and means of supporting herself sometimes better than other members of her community do. Vivian is whip-smart and efficient, but her story is moving and believable, because her personality isn't all sugar and spice. Her temper tantrums, a self-centered foray into alcohol exploration at the expense of a sweet friend, and other lippy moments provide a more real, in-depth look at her character. The story is more character-driven than action-packed, but several things are still happening and moving at a fast enough pace that readers shouldn't be bored for a minute. A few of the highlights: Holly's mom loses her jewelry after suffering a stroke ... what's happened to it? Then there's Racine, the guy coming in from New York to open a cash-for-gold store which Vivian has invested in (and hired Holly, who also works for the community newspaper, to oversee Racine's operation). Is he really interested in Holly, who hasn't had a date since her husband died? Or is he a

scam artist or a thief? What will Holly do when the newspaper is threatened because ad sales are down?

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