



## A Curious Host

**Nanette L. Avery**

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*Lucid, interconnected portraits of adults reveal defeat, yearning, ambition, and loneliness.*

Nanette L. Avery pays impressive tribute to the Southern Gothic in *A Curious Host*. Against a backdrop of heavy rain, this panoramic novel examines a town plagued by an unknown pathogen, and its residents' private failures and far-flung dreams.

The deliberate plot avoids the panic found in less controlled tales of biological contamination. A lingering pace builds tension through portraits of men and women who go about their lives without knowing that danger awaits them. Chapters alternate between a widowed biologist, waitresses at a diner, a drunk, a self-made preacher, the town's barbers, a bold female poker player and her housemate, and minor figures, all while tracking the wanderings of a yellow canine. When the rains uncover a buried secret that threatens to level the community, terror awakens.

The plot leaves plentiful hints on reasons for the outbreak, but doesn't dwell on the insidious nature of the pathogen or the specific inquiries that would normally surround such a discovery. Science takes a backseat to the overall atmosphere built around the unnamed town. The illness that strikes the residents begins to feel as inevitable as a biblical catastrophe, yet the writing is finely calibrated enough to never make it seem too dramatic. Scenes layer normalcy with the gradual, disquieting reality that death is not particular.

Within the darker narrative of a plain town being wrecked, myriad smaller narratives shine in their ability to capture vibrant personalities. Especially outstanding are Pearl, the diner's head waitress, who dyes her hair, changes her name at whim, and cuts out National Geographic magazine photos to paper her apartment; JJ, a heavysset straight-talker who reveals her vulnerabilities when traveling to the beach; and Jen, JJ's cousin. Women in the novel draw from deep reserves to carve a place for themselves. For all the routine experienced in the course of their days, they display an appealing strength.

Forays into the town's history occasionally distract from the plot. Repetition also slows the work in passages that trace the dog's path as it rummages for food and traipses through a graveyard. Though the stray plays a key role, he never quite becomes the omen the story seems to call for, and remains more of a strategic device.

*A Curious Host* skillfully presents an unremarkable, American town that becomes, for a brief time and for macabre reasons, a site of interest. Lucid, interconnected portraits reveal defeat, yearning, ambition, and the ways in which people who are familiar with each other can still possess deep loneliness.

KAREN RIGBY (September 7, 2016)

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