A Lady in Havana

Ashley Morgan
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A Lady in Havana is self-referential, winking, and thoroughly situated in the Cuban culture of yesteryear.

Ashley Morgan’s entertaining novel of passion and persuasion, A Lady in Havana, puts a Floridian housewife in the eye of a storm. A colorful blend of glamour, betrayal, and old-fashioned American dreaming, Dorothy “Dimple” Duncan’s adventure in 1950s Cuba paves the way for her own daughter’s awakening.

The plot shifts between the present and the past. In the present, Dimple is a stroke survivor who lives in a senior center. Her adult daughter, Hallie, visits her with a recorder, eager to hear stories of her mother’s youth. For Hallie, Dimple recounts her time in Havana, when she fell improbably in love with a Cuban lawyer, Roberto, despite her simultaneous love for her husband, Dallis. Hallie, in the present, faces her own romantic dilemmas.

As over-the-top as some situations are, the book balances its deadpan seriousness with pure delight. Dimple’s oral history, however truthful or embellished it may be, is narrated with a strong voice. All of its components are gathered together for an unpredictable view of the era, including an elaborate school bus sale orchestrated by Roberto that is the impetus for Dimple and Dallis winding up in Cuba.

Dimple’s romance skirts danger and luck with flair. The story involves adultery and Dimple’s transformation from a canasta-playing Southerner into a spy who meets Castro before the invasion of Cuba. The book’s last situation is pulled off with imaginative drama that ties back to the original harebrained deal. The result is a rom-com that also becomes a broader alternative history.

Hallie’s chapters are less fully considered than Dimple’s tale. A divorcée, she’s dating a multimillionaire who she’s unsure of, even while she’s flirting with her MFA writing professor. She’s also gambling on her novel in progress, which is based on Dimple’s life, as being her ticket to self-empowerment. Its a naïve, hopeful, and funny side note that serves as a self-referential wink. The near desperation and elation Hallie displays whenever Dimple starts and stops her story is humorous, and the way that her circumstances sometimes mirror her mother’s—including her encounter with a Lothario—is interesting. However, she doesn’t evolve far beyond being a vessel for Dimple’s secrets.

There’s minimal interaction between Dimple and Hallie beyond the recording. Dimple nearly always picks up where she left off; this keeps the pace brisk but leaves what Hallie makes of her mother’s revelations in the background. What Dimple hopes for Hallie is similarly subdued. When the two story lines reach their finish, there’s less crossover than might be expected; it’s the past that stands out more.

With its meticulous view of Havana’s social life, A Lady in Havana is a fascinating depiction of lasting memories.

KAREN RIGBY (April 25, 2019)

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