



A Very Good Life

Lynn Steward

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This earnest tribute to the '70s offers optimistic commentary on personal empowerment and larger-than-life characters.

Lynn Steward's debut novel, *A Very Good Life*, charts a little more than a week in the life of a “disciplined woman who knew what she wanted, and, more importantly, how to get it.” Set during the holidays in 1974 New York, the story features twenty-nine-year-old Dana McGarry, who confronts the problems of an estranged marriage alongside the challenges of working as the public relations and special events coordinator for B. Altman, a historic department store. Brisk, entertaining, and punctuated with cameos by icons of the fashion and beauty industry, this earnest tribute to the era offers optimistic commentary on personal empowerment.

Steward, whose experience in marketing and merchandising informs the work, originally penned the idea for *A Very Good Life* as a television pilot. The plot's structure bears traces of the medium, alternating between Dana's perspective and that of her lawyer husband's. Readers learn about his affair with a coworker long before Dana does; still, Steward allows tension to build during the wait for Dana's discovery by splicing contrasts between her expectations for their future and her husband's self-centered disregard.

At times the writing takes an explanatory, unshaded approach to characters' responses, including moments such as “She felt conflicted, torn” and “The weekend had been a rollercoaster, with Dana's emotions vacillating between hope that her marriage was on the mend and disappointment over Brett's thoughtless behavior.” The uncomplicated messages in the novel are compensated for through larger-than-life secondary characters that further echo a televised drama. These include a world-traveling, single colleague; a snappy, chain-smoking Italian boss; a particularly appealing, tireless friend; and relatives with distinctive traits, including Dana's brook-no-nonsense mother.

Through class-specific details, from party menus to the keeping of wine journals, a privileged world emerges in which the wealthy McGarrys maintain appearances amid the impending revelation of infidelity.

Dana's eventual move toward divorce is seldom in question, yet the familiar theme of a woman attempting “to keep moving” remains intriguing, as Steward includes subthemes on feminism; several references are made to 1975 being International Women's Year, suggesting that Dana is poised on the brink of wider social shifts.

The portrayal of Dana as an accommodating spouse who learns to acknowledge her own needs is thoughtfully presented, not as a sudden awakening, but as a series of reflections, perhaps best summed when she reaffirms her belief that “how you handle adversity is just as important as how you perform in the contest” and that instead of allowing oneself to remain unsettled by specific moments, one should examine the bigger picture.

A Very Good Life succeeds most in sections that reveal the B. Altman store as both a proving ground and a refuge. For all the emphasis on Dana's faltering marriage, it is the promising setting, her supportive friends, and her own aplomb that combine to turn the work into a winsome account of redirecting—and remaking—the future.

KAREN RIGBY (May 16, 2014)

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