ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

Appalachian Carnival
S.M.Fernand
Edgewise Publications
978-0-9858070-7-8
(Aug 1, 2012)

“Most people are afraid to take a chance with their lives,” muses Walt Ryder, a carnival operator of unusual magnetism, in the early pages of S.M. Fernand’s debut novel. That sympathetic recognition is part of what draws teenaged Annabelle Cory to him; in larger part, she’s compelled by his believable-enough insistence that she’s the girl of his dreams.

Annabelle’s narration is enlivened by a mixture of colorful, unabashed colloquialisms and phrases she’s gleaned from books. The novel follows her as she abandons the West Virginia coal town of her youth, where, despite her curiosity and beauty, she’s at grave risk of becoming just another sad tale. When Walt offers her a chance to light out with the carnival, she eagerly accepts.

This break with convention is the first of many for Annabelle, who finds herself ravenous for new experiences—any and all which might help her understand who she is, and what life holds for her. The Midway is happy to respond to her hunger. Annabelle finds her soul’s kin amongst the carnies, folks whom the outside world thoughtlessly dismisses as “freaks,” but who in actuality prove to be an enlightened bunch.

Isis, the bearded lady, is there to help with questions of spirituality; Lula, the fat lady, is a willing coach when it comes to love; and Madeline, the daughter of a game operator, has access to drugs. Beyond all of these teachers stands Walt, his presence igniting unfamiliar lust in Annabelle, though the ordinariness of his daily routines confuses her between their salacious encounters.

The glitz and bustle of the Midway contends with the common world surrounding it for Annabelle’s senses, and in the span of one eye-opening week, she comes to see how truly intertwined both arenas are. Or, more accurately, how little each feels like home to her. A bit of genuine monetary luck coupled with real danger is the impetus for one final brave decision from Annabelle in the closing chapters of this fast-moving thrill of a book.

Fernand’s heroine is a character perpetually ready for what’s next in life, and the reader will be dazzled by the chances that she takes. The author’s own experiences behind the scenes of

carnival life may be the magic ingredient in these beguiling pages; though the setting will be foreign to most readers, authenticity is never an issue. Sexy, provocative, and entertaining, this dense novel of self-discovery is well worth the price of admission.

Michelle Anne Schingler