Clarion Review

General

Be Still
Tania L. Ramos
iUniverse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

The title of Tania L. Ramos's second novel, *Be Still*, reflects the story itself: simple on the surface, but with layers of meaning beneath. The book is a contemporary tale about the relationships between family members and how they survive the storms life throws at them. Delving further, readers will find an exploration of the meaning of life, death, and what may lie beyond.

The story begins dramatically, and readers quickly come up to speed on the life of Dr. Jack Silver, a famous plastic surgeon known for his work with trauma victims. No stranger to trauma himself, Jack has suffered incredible losses in his personal life, including the death of his three-day-old daughter, Holly, and the subsequent loss of his wife, Shannon. His son, Travis, is his last remaining family member, and the two appear to be hopelessly estranged.

When Jack receives a shocking medical diagnosis, he tries to reconcile with Travis, but the path to peace is not a smooth one. Family secrets have haunted both men for a lifetime; it will take more than a few phone calls to repair the damage.

Flowery, dreamlike language in the very first sentence—"Purplish-pink hues swirled together in the distant horizon"—suggests that Ramos's book is a traditional romance novel. Indeed, the love stories—Jack's marriage to Shannon, and Travis's courting of Jack's protégé, Dr. Christine Amity—are both awash in adjectives and adverbs. The heightened emotions can get overwhelming, but Ramos tempers them with authentic medical details and expertly written dialogue that captures the day-to-day lives of her characters. The ongoing flirtatious banter between Travis and Chris incorporates welcome humor.

Strong images add another dimension to Ramos's story. The elaborate fantasy scenes depicting Shannon and Holly in an imagined afterworld give these characters an eerie quality. Especially fascinating is the repeated image of the glass *guan cai*, or Chinese coffin. It

beautifully illuminates Ramos's themes of entrapment and freedom, of protection and transparency.

Pacing is uneven, as Ramos reveals many dramatic details in the first few pages, but then slows down considerably following promises of more revelations from a secret diary left behind by Shannon. It is a few hundred pages before readers get a look at the diary. In the meantime, the narrative follows Jack's thoughts as his disease progresses, Travis's memories of his childhood, and the growing sexual tension between Chris and Travis.

Dangling the promise of the journal at intervals, Ramos keeps readers turning pages to find out what happened to Jack's family when Holly died, and what ultimately caused Shannon's death. She satisfies that curiosity near the end of the novel, but by then readers know so much about the characters and their pasts that the journal's contents are hardly shocking.

A study in relationships with the living and the dead, *Be Still* explores the power of the past over the present. Repairing the past isn't always as straightforward as Dr. Silver's restorative surgeries, but it is possible.

Sheila M. Trask