



Before She Was Helen

Caroline B. Cooney

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As it controverts stereotypes regarding the formidability of villains and the fragility of senior citizens, Caroline B. Cooney's mystery novel *Before She Was Helen* is a delight.

Clemmie is a resident of Sun City, a retirees' community where she's known as Helen, a quiet Latin teacher. She appreciates the relative anonymity of Sun City living: bland activities rule, and no one asks many questions. But her genial hideaway is compromised when she snaps a photograph of a magnificent glass sculpture in a neighboring bungalow. Her great-nephew recognizes it as stolen work; its previous owner is informed of its whereabouts, and he decides to come after it in person.

But Sun City's residents are tougher than he expects: they steal, they kill, they deal, and they live under assumed identities. A body is already festering in the garage when he arrives. While police investigators are hesitant to affix "suspect" to people prone to forgetfulness, Clemmie's neighbors, more piqued than scandalized, defrost casseroles to trade for information about the murder in their midst. Clemmie becomes a reluctant participant, harboring a drug dealer in her laundry room and hoping that her fingerprints won't connect to a fifty-year-old cold case.

While Sun City's sly and scheming residents take full advantage of the low expectations of others, the novel's villains exhibit hubris, underrating those they work against. A slight girl may seem an easy target, and a retiree an unlikely killer, but neither presumption is safe. Coach Creek, the nightmare from Clemmie's past who inspired her second life, stalks the novel's pages before receiving his comeuppance; the moment is irresistible, as are late hopes that Clemmie may have the reunion that she's longed for across decades.

In Caroline B. Cooney's delicious mystery novel, predators are punished and underestimated seniors get their due.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2020)

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