

Before the Applause

Judith McGuinness

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Judith McGuinness, author of two previous books, plunges readers into the horror of nine-year-old Macy Sinclair's suffering at the hands of her cruel father Laurent. As Macy awaits his imminent mistreatment, Marie Laveau, the mystical Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, appears. Macy quickly learns that the tales of terror Laurent told her about Marie are untrue. Marie saves Macy from Laurent and helps her cross paths with twenty-two year-old musician, Johnny McElroo, who becomes Macy's guardian. The young man and the girl embark on a music-filled destiny, with Marie Laveau watching over them. Such is the plot of McGuinness' compelling novel, *Before the Applause*.

The author deftly creates a tale of familial love between Macy and Johnny while the gruesome pall of the girl's abuse intrudes on their budding rapport. As Macy and Johnny's tentative bond begins, McGuinness poignantly explores the lasting effects of torment on a child's psyche while Johnny makes a slow but realistic maturation from aimless young man into father figure with a purpose. When Johnny and his friends form a band, his fellow members quickly become big-brother figures to Macy. The camaraderie of Johnny and his musicians, Macy's melodies, and Johnny's musical numbers make readers root for this fledgling group, and the pages turn as smoothly as Southern jazz. Refreshingly, no one fusses about the sexual orientation of the gay couple who joins the group. Intermittent appearances by the modern-day fairy-godmother figure of Marie Laveau lends the story a deliciously supernatural air. Marie is African-American, and her maternal protectiveness of a Caucasian little girl represents a relationship that transcends racial stereotypes.

Occasionally, though, McGuinness veers a little off course. For example, there is an implication that Johnny and his friends view Macy as a sex object, instead of as a little girl. The band's constant references to her beauty may discomfit some readers. It is clear, nonetheless, that the author does not intend for these men to be aroused by the child. One wishes, however, that the author's word choice left no room for interpretations of pedophilia. Sometimes, also, the specter of Laurent infiltrates too much, so much so that Johnny, bizarrely, gives Macy alcohol to help her sleep. To make a young child drink seems out-of-character for the upstanding Johnny, especially after he learns Laurent is a drunkard. Readers may find themselves worried that little Macy will become an alcoholic. Johnny himself entertains such a possibility, only to dismiss it. Furthermore, some prior knowledge of the mythology of Marie Laveau is helpful because the author fails to provide readers with enough context about her. All in all, *Before the Applause* sweeps readers away to a magical place where love and music conquer all.

JILL ALLEN (February 9, 2012)

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