



Behind the Drapes

Nancy Prudhomme

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Abuse in all of its malevolent forms drives Nancy Prudhomme's first novel *Behind the Drapes*. Sheila shares a home in the projects with three older siblings and a younger sister as well as a controlling abusive father and a submissive insecure mother. As Sheila's siblings turn sixteen they are turned out on the streets no longer considered members of the family. Readers are given a minimal sense of the abuse heaped on these older children but the abuse Sheila receives fills page after page. As she changes from girl to woman the abuse grows with her. No longer can Sheila remain silent and yearn for invisibility. As her body begins to mature her father uses her for his sexual pleasure. "Be a good girl" he tells her. "And take care of your daddy."

A short reprieve gives her hope for a better life but her mother drags Sheila and her younger sister back into a home with Bobby their abusive father. This non-stop litany of abuse degradation hopelessness and violence continues until Sheila turns sixteen and heads out on her own conveniently meeting a couple who help her get a job and offer her a room. In their house she meets her future husband: "She stood up shook his hand and smiled. At that moment Jack fell in love with Sheila and vowed to himself that she would be his. Jack appeared to be a gentleman."

Sex and love are incompatible in her world after the training she received from her father and Sheila brings her dysfunction into this new relationship with a man ten years older than her mere sixteen years. Everyone but Jack brings harm or pain to Sheila. A friend uses her as a sexual gift to her uncle who bails her out of a shoplifting charge. Sheila's older brother Rick reenters her life and introduces her to cocaine. She embraces addictive drugs that further complicate her happily-ever-after life with her husband. The details documenting the abuses unrelentingly fill this dark novel but the book ends on a note of hope.

Prudhomme devotes the entire novel to only one storyline—Sheila's—but never develops the characters. They remain one-dimensional stereotypes leaving readers disconnected and unsympathetic. All novels even those that deal with such a powerful topic as abuse require the use of fictional techniques or careful crafting to bring them to life. *Behind the Drapes* is sadly lacking in this area. The book reads like a journal or a superficial report. "Sheila was carrying too many books when she almost lost her footing and tumbled down the stairs" Prudhomme writes. "All her books went falling and two boys almost started to fight trying to pick them up for her. One of them the bigger one Tony managed to scoop them up and bring them over to Sheila."

The story of abuse has been told in fiction and memoir for ages. Sadly this flawed reportage-laden uncrafted novel brings together superficial and stereotypical characters who act out the same old depressing story. (August 21, 2009)

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