

Birds of Wonder

Cynthia Robinson

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Birds of Wonder is an absorbing, often disturbing mystery in which no one seems truly trustworthy by the end.

When a beautiful and audacious teenager is found dead in a sleepy college town, everyone is under suspicion—from her foster siblings, who are in deep on some scandalous deeds, to a disquietingly observant painter whose new project involves redeeming broken girls. Cynthia Robinson's properly eerie *Birds of Wonder* captures the ensuing investigations with particular style.

Beatrice, the prim but scattered theater director at the local high school, is doubly dismayed by her discovery of her protégé, Amber's, violently injured body in a field. Her daughter, Jesca, is the overly qualified investigator assigned to the case; she's intent on solving it but is as interested or more so in resuming her affair with Liam, a local vintner who's high in the suspect pool.

Add to this cast a smarmy artist and his alcoholic sister, a bird-obsessed field hand who definitely interacted with Amber's body, and a photographer intent on exploiting the deceased girl's beauty for personal gain, and the result is an absorbing, often disturbing mystery in which no one seems truly trustworthy by the end.

The text is high on the art world, both at a linguistic level—as it captures the sweet scent of rotting plums or the cast of light on an uncomfortable scene—and with the progression of its plot. Artists abound, and are all a little too absorbed with their own mediums to be properly humane or observant.

This runs right down to overwrought Jes, a former theater geek who is enraged by artifice. She is convinced that something she saw years ago in Thailand revealed an impenetrable darkness beneath her family's calm facade, and her devotion to this story line results in some of the story's more dramatic turns.

Birds of Wonder rips through its intriguing cast with the same satisfying fervor that it devotes to demolishing Beatrice's collection of painted birds or to revealing the flaws of people who work hard to keep a lid on. Amber's demise turns out to be the result of an event neither as lascivious nor as vicious as first expected; still, her death stands as an indictment of the way that human beings refuse to fully see one another, even when they stand in close proximity.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January/February 2018)

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