Clarion Review

Juvenile Fiction

Bluster's Shudder
Nancy Bjerke
CreateSpace
978-1-4536-7160-3
Three Stars (out of Five)

From her bedroom window, Sarah Alexander can see the hillside home of her elderly neighbor, Mrs. Bluster. “In the full moon, she watched old Bluster dancing in the backyard or flying across the moon.”

Sarah’s prickly Aunt Jane chalks up Sarah’s account of what she sees to her niece’s imagination. Besides, Aunt Jane is too busy pampering Sarah’s younger sister, the precocious and spoiled kindergartner, Lizzy. Both girls have lived with their maternal aunt for several years, due to never fully explained tragedies that befell their parents.

Set in current times in the New England port town of Collymore Harbor, several story lines unfold at once in *Bluster’s Shudder*, the debut novel by Nancy Bjerke. All seem to somehow connect to old Mrs. Bluster in a believable way. One of the main characters is Sarah’s friend, Jack, who was found abandoned on the docks as a small boy and taken in by Beth and John March, whose own son disappeared years earlier. Another one is Willy Wu, who, along with his five sisters, disappears one October afternoon; most townspeople believe they were washed out to sea after falling off the seawall.

Sarah, Jack, Willy, and squirrelly classmate Chip Hensen are upper elementary school students—the age group this book targets (nine to fourteen). Dialogue between these characters rings true, as do Sarah’s ongoing personality conflicts with her aunt.

Bjerke’s writing shines in her descriptive passages, such as when Sarah first enters Bluster’s third floor cupola: “Storm clouds were breaking and the peek-a-boo moon cast strange light across the tower room. A gust blew in an open window sending the old rocker rocking with an invisible rider.”

Adding further ambiance to the story are the tiny spiderweb accents that appears on the upper right-hand corner of pages and the hissing cat silhouette at the start of each chapter.

It's a cat—Sebastian, who belongs to Bluster—who befriends the lonely Sarah along the way. "Sarah gently held the soft, warm lump with her right arm and ever so gently stroked his back. A peaceful rumbling covered Sarah's chest and reached all the way to her heart."

While the quality of the writing is good, the book does suffer from some challenges. Because there are several interconnecting story lines, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the clues interwoven throughout the book. The timeline of events is a bit fuzzy, and more careful editing would take care of a few misspellings and word omissions. And the magical (potions), mysterious (a small hatchet-shaped talisman), and downright creepy (sleeping pods), which all make appearances in the book, awkwardly bump up against the modern age, as when Bluster uses a computer to follow Sarah and Lizzy's movements.

Nancy Bjerke's novel is intended to be the first in a series, so readers will hopefully be intrigued enough to wait for future volumes to possibly discover the answers to many of the unanswered questions in *Bluster's Shudder*.

Robin Farrell Edmunds