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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Clarice: Her Journey through Life

Harriet Maxwell
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From the age of sixteen onward, Clarice battles with food and slips in and out of romantic liaisons. *Clarice: Her Journey through Life* by debut author Harriet Maxwell examines the effects that both eating and loving have on the protagonist. With her personal knowledge of mental illness and her own life experience with romance, the author positions herself to create a convincing portrait of a main character struggling with eating disorders while managing her love life.

Using her training as a doctor and her medical knowledge of many conditions, Maxwell lends a poignant realism to Clarice's ups and downs with food. While the main character clearly has an eating disorder, she is not defined by her illness. She remains a devoted mother and worker, attempting to balance her jobs with her romantic whims. Clarice finds herself involved with all sorts of men, from the sexually violent to the sexually frustrated.

After marrying Terry, who she considers the "love of her life," Clarice ends up comitting adultery even as she claims to be happy with her husband and son. The protagonist's openness and honesty about her behaviors and feelings prompt readers to empathize with her while they may disagree with her actions. Her exploits make for an interesting read and a compelling case study for those interested in the root cause of eating disorders. Students of addictive behaviors and psychology will be interested to note how the main character's cycles of overeating and bingeing wax and wane depending on her mood and life events. Just as Clarice seems to balance her eating habits, a crisis comes along and throws her off-kilter.

In addition to the men who come in and out of Clarice's life, it is also fascinating to watch her journey of faith as she becomes a born-again Christian, loses her religion, and finds her way back to the Church for a time, all the while relying on hypnosis as a cure for her ills. Furthermore, the novel also tells the story of a woman trying to find her niche in life, an issue to which the majority of female readers will relate. Clarice tries to find a place where she belongs while coping with societal expectations of her gender, the self she wishes to create, and the pressures from her family of origin.

The novel's quirks are significant enough to annoy but small enough not to impede reader enjoyment. Some clarity around the era in which the book is set would be helpful. In the beginning, Clarice talks of going to work at sixteen and of her mom being a housewife, and it is not clear when in the twentieth century the book is set: the early 1900s, after the advent of the automobile, or the 1980s. Clarice's life is engrossing, which makes the frequency with which Maxwell resorts to summary paragraphs unfortunate. The author is at her best when pulling readers in with the immediacy of her dialog, and there are some places where this is sorely lacking. At points, one can see the plot machinery working too hard; the supposedly random crises of Clarice's life sometimes happen far too conveniently.

Despite these missteps, women and psychology students who can get past the nondescript cover will find a worthwhile read.

JILL ALLEN (January 14, 2013)

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