

Close Knit

Linda Marchus

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Knitting brings two very different women together after a tragedy in this touching young adult novel.

For her first young adult novel, *Close Knit*, Linda Marchus borrows a favorite theme of women's fiction: the crafting circle that brings women together in spite of their differences. The relationship between the two narrators, a bereaved teenage girl and a sixty-year-old recluse, is moving. The novel knits these characters' bittersweet histories into one tidy tale.

Taylor Adams's mother dies on the evening of Taylor's seventeenth birthday. Now, in addition to the usual teenage concerns of who will ask her to the Valentine's dance and which senior project to complete, Taylor must keep her household together as her father descends into alcoholism. When she meets her neighbor, Star, an aging hippie and hoarder who introduces Taylor to knitting, she finds a kindred spirit. There is much sadness still to come for Star and the Adams family, but the comforts of knitting, soul food, and unexpected friendship will help Taylor cope.

Although Taylor is an engaging character, the first-person narration makes her sound much younger than seventeen. At times her vocabulary seems more appropriate to a ten-year-old, with word choices such as "yucky," "old lady illness," or "Yum. I didn't like cereal with milk." Especially as she takes on more responsibility, paying the bills while her father is incapacitated with grief (and bourbon) and knitting baby blankets for a local birthing center, this immature voice becomes increasingly inappropriate.

The sudden introduction of Star's point of view in chapter 9 comes as a relief: Star's more genuine voice offers tender insight into the mindset of a character who might otherwise be dismissed as a stereotypical crazy old lady. From here on, a chapter from Star's point of view follows every few chapters from Taylor's. The variety is welcome, but occasionally it means that plot points are belabored when spelled out from two different perspectives.

Marchus neatly brings together the novel's several plot strands: Star moves in when Taylor's father enters rehab, and high-schoolers organize Star's overstuffed home for their senior project. Poppi's sudden alcoholism seems far-fetched, however, rendering his story melodramatic. Dialogue usually flows well, but the book sometimes resorts to simplistic sentences that underestimate the audience. Such less-than-subtle lines include "Her death was sudden and unexpected," "When I shop, I feel happy," and "I didn't want to gain a lot of weight. Then I'd have to buy bigger clothes." The novel also overuses the cliché about turning lemons into lemonade, often adapting it improbably, as in "a dress that might have been a lemon, but I focused on the lemonade" or "He put on a strong front, as if to make lemonade."

Mature teens will be able to handle this novel's serious themes of tragic death and alcoholism. Though they might agree that Taylor's childish voice does not quite capture their adolescent experience, young women who have been intrigued by their mothers' copies of *The Knitting Circle* by Ann Hood or *Friendship Bread* by Darien Gee should love *Close Knit*.

REBECCA FOSTER (April 15, 2014)

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