

Cobwebs on the Chandelier

Dorothy Monroe

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“A woman’s work is never done.”

It is an old saying, probably because it has always rung true, especially for women who are mothers. Dorothy Monroe’s essay collection, *Cobwebs on the Chandelier*, could easily be subtitled “a woman’s work” for the way it chronicles the many duties of a wife, mother, student, and professional over several decades. Monroe lightens the load, however, with her humorous take on the day-to-day struggles faced by families everywhere.

Writing in a clear, friendly tone, Monroe offers entertaining stories of domestic disasters narrowly averted—the sorts of anecdotes that reassure other parents. Readers will enjoy learning that someone else has tried to clean vomit from a car floor with only Handi Wipes, or that they are in good company when it comes to letting kids eat the cake that has just plummeted to the kitchen floor.

An accomplished writer since her first piece for an Iowa State College publication in the 1950s, Monroe has published work in a variety of genres. Her fiction and poetry have won several awards, and she writes about health care in a blog called *Healthcare Second Opinion*. For these essays, she has chosen a simple, folksy style that engages the everyday reader.

This neighborly style is most effective when Monroe concentrates on a single scene in day-to-day living, such as the treacherous cleaning of the chandelier that provides the title for the collection. Readers are right there with her as she climbs up on the dining room table, knowing it isn’t going to end well for Monroe but aware of the fact that they have done the very same sort of thing themselves. This self-deprecating humor is what makes Monroe’s stories so relatable and charming.

Less satisfying are essays that cover several events, such as the piece on cooking with children. Individual moments are still hilarious, including lessons in the wisdom of latching the blender lid before setting the chocolate pudding mix on high, but readers may be left wanting more, particularly about the children themselves. While Monroe describes her many houses in detail, readers are not offered much about her kids’ personalities; this is a loss since so much of her life revolves around her four children.

Monroe divides her stories into sections with titles like “Trial by Family” and “Housekeeping,” and with illustrations by Jonathan Ball that crystallize the content. One look at the woman in the gas mask, armed with a toilet brush, and you know what subject will follow. Monroe adds brief comments to the pictures, but they seem unnecessary and sometimes only tangentially on topic.

A quick and enjoyable read for any parent who ever wanted to trade “war stories” with other families, *Cobwebs on the Chandelier* is a lighthearted look at the many roles juggled by women with families.

SHEILA M. TRASK (September 10, 2012)

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