

Dancing with Langston

Sharyn Skeeter

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Dancing with Langston is a powerful novel about the rewards and the realities of following one's dreams.

A visit to an elderly relative turns a mourning woman's life upside down in Sharyn Skeeter's absorbing novel *Dancing with Langston*.

Before she can move out west and start a new life, Carrie must fulfill one last promise to her late father: to help his cousin Ella settle into an assisted living facility. What Carrie expects to be a quick and simple task soon turns into a painful journey into Ella and Carrie's pasts. The more Carrie learns about her vivacious family history and her secretive father, the more she wonders if her own dependable life is truly the one she wants.

The story takes place over the course of a single day and is mostly set in Ella's cluttered, condemned apartment. It is a fascinating place, steeped in history and tragedy. Sights, scents, and textures combine to form an immersive world that keeps its occupants suspended in the past while propelling Carrie to a brighter future.

Ella's life is just as gripping, and she shares it with Carrie slowly, revealing old family tales featuring luminaries including Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. While entertaining in their own right, of greater interest are the lessons that these stories, and the faded treasures hidden in the apartment, can teach—a fact that Carrie comes to realize the longer she allows herself to listen to Ella's words.

The direct plot and single setting allow the heartbreaking, resilient characters to shine. Every character has more going on than is stated in explicit terms, and there's nuance and depth to their interactions. Relationships are depicted in subtle but evocative ways, as with Carrie's husband, for whom one conversation makes it clear what sort of man he is and what his marriage is like. From Ella's different ways of answering the door to the neighbors' clothing, the details are sharp.

Carrie's day of self-discovery culminates in a moving finale. Her life is no easier than it was before—if anything, it's harder. But knowing that she has grown enough to choose the more difficult and more rewarding path is cathartic. Thought-provoking discussion questions cap the work with sensitivity.

Its details exquisite and its characters compelling, *Dancing with Langston* is a powerful novel about the rewards and the realities of following one's dreams.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (February 12, 2020)

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