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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Death by Chaos

Renaii West
Amazon KDP (Sep 1, 2020)
(167pp)
979-869201940-0

Death by Chaos *is a compelling novel in which a moment changes four college students' lives forever.*

Renaii West's coming-of-age novel *Death by Chaos* focuses on a four-girl friend group in college in the 1970s.

Easygoing Tasha, beautiful Elizabeth, wise Dawn, and student journalist Miranda are assigned to the same dorm room at a California university. They fast become best friends, despite their differing personalities: among them are a sex symbol, a leader, an intellect, and a troublemaker. On campus, they are admired and respected by all. The attention is such that the girls come to compare themselves to Greek goddesses; their frequent references to these deities make their atmosphere intriguing.

Much of the book is devoted to differentiating between the four women, resulting in period subtext about being young in the seventies. In the golden period of the women's college years, everything seems achievable; their possibilities are endless. Precise details about the women's personalities, appearances, and lifestyles come through in their intimate conversations about their families, hopes, and dreams. They discuss what they imagine their lives will be like, and debate beauty versus intelligence.

The girls' college years are spent attending parties, exchanging secrets, smoking weed in the dorm bathroom, and sometimes studying. Their experiences change them, and they learn to navigate the world well. But then Tasha connects with Kip, a wealthy, arrogant young man. That same night, Kip kills himself; Tasha and Miranda witness his death, and secrets and chaos ensue. When Miranda disappears, her friends set out to prove her innocence.

The novel moves with speed, and its language is colloquial and easy to understand. The best portions of the book are its dialogue sections, wherein straightforward language captures the essence of the women's personalities. Their feelings and emotions dominate the book's scenes, more so than any drama that happens around them. After Kip's death, a powerful contrast arises between what could have been for the women, and the futures they actually move toward. Still, the scene devoted to Kip's death, which is the turning point of the women's stories, is rushed. Too many important details are excluded. Because of this, while the book initially presents as a mystery, it comes to read more as a coming-of-age story. The mystery elements are subsumed as the book moves toward its end.

Death by Chaos is a compelling novel in which a moment changes four college students' lives forever.

ANNA MARIA COLIVICCHI (April 3, 2021)

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