ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Falling Off Air
Catherine Sampson
Kate Reading, narrator
Blackstone Audio Books
978-0-7861-8439-2
(October 2004)

Robin Ballantyne, the heroine of this audiobook, an amateur sleuth who earns her living as a television producer, is on extended maternity leave after the birth of twins, William and Hannah. After many years of floundering, she finally feels as if her life is coming together. While she's been abandoned by her irresponsible boyfriend Adam, she does feel prepared for motherhood and adores her children. She's settling into single parenthood and putting her life together quite nicely.

One night, while putting her children to bed, she hears an argument, after which a body falls from an apartment the floor above hers. Running outside, hoping to be of help, she finds the body of a neighbor she knows only by sight—Paula Carmichael, an activist known as "the social conscience of the United Kingdom."

Adam, Robin's ex-beau and the father of her twins, has been working on a documentary about Paula Carmichael. With Carmichael's death, the film is shelved, inviting a media frenzy. Unable to resist the urge to report on the story, Robin asks for her old job back; instead, her boss offers her the dull position of ethics editor.

Proximity paired with coincidence makes Robin a suspect in Paula's murder, as does one of her business cards being found on the body, and a mention of her name in Paula's diary. An accident involving Robin's BMW, her ex-boyfriend, and a nasty argument about visitation rights makes her the suspect in a second murder.

Like many of the best American women mystery writers—Nevada Barr, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky—this author has created a smart and funny character worthy of serialization. Sampson's writing is clever, and she understands the comedy inherent in having a detective who has to hire a babysitter before heading out to work.

Robin uses all the skills she's honed in the workplace to clear her name. Her search for the real killer takes Robin into interesting spots in London as well as to Cornwall, during the off-season. The foggy scenes are reminiscent of stories involving earlier English characters like

Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper.

The audio quality of the book is exceptionally stylish. The reader's manner is warm, engaging, and humorous when appropriate. With a minimum of sound effects or music, the CDs leave the reader to imagine the characters, the scenes, and the unfolding of the story as the author wrote it.

Sampson, a former Beijing correspondent for the *London Times*, is currently a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in magazines as diverse as *Vogue* and *The Economist*. A wife and mother of three living in London, she uses many of her experiences in this debut novel, a murder mystery worthy of the bestseller list.

Pam Kingsbury