

From a Distance

Vernon Bargainer

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Here's a pleasant surprise: a romance with admirable, realistic characters.

From the author of three previous books about the triumph of the human spirit comes a tale of redemption and renewal, a poignant testimony to love's healing power. *From a Distance* chronicles nineteen-year-old Sarah Lock's transition from abused wife to brave lover as she flees her brutal spouse. A realistic and heart-wrenching romance, this novel presents a fully fledged setting, passionate dialogue, and lovable characters.

As she hides at her aunt and uncle's house, Sarah seeks rejuvenation in the beautiful prairie, unaware that Kevin Lane observes her from afar. Kevin finds himself immediately attracted to Sarah, while she struggles to overcome her inner demons and the threat of her ex-husband so she can return Kevin's affections. The beauty of nature, the realities of abuse, the strength of family ties, and the human ability to overcome adversity converge to create a strong, cohesive novel.

Sarah immediately emerges as a character of fortitude and optimism despite her desperate circumstances. She is also smart and shrewdly aware of human behavior, making her story a must-read for those who love assertive female characters. While authors often depict teenagers as immature, Bargainer gives readers a young person with enough wherewithal to leave a dysfunctional relationship after her ex hits her once.

Although the story takes place in the present, Bargainer imbues his tale with a fairy-tale sensibility that meshes well with this modern romance. From his descriptions of nature as having "dark, dreamy shades ... full of surprises" to the fact that Kevin and Sarah seem destined for each other even before officially meeting, readers sense fairy-tale tropes playing out in ingenious ways against the backdrop of a luscious Texas landscape.

Interestingly, Mother Nature herself is not just part of the setting here but a full-fledged character because of the way Sarah and Kevin treat the natural world with such reverence. The slow buildup of Sarah and Kevin's courtship—they watch each other for a long time before one finally dares to speak, and there is much small talk prior to actual conversations—represents a welcome change from love stories with immediate fiery passion. Christian readers will be pleased that characters often pray to and give thanks to God.

Of course, a novel is often only as good as its portrayal of conflict, and Bargainer excels in this realm. It's refreshing and realistic to see that Sarah's main obstacle is internal; after the debacle with her ex, she must learn to believe she is worthy of Kevin's adoration. Also, as with real-life romance, two people don't always fall in love at the same time. This means that, although Kevin is already quite smitten, he has to wait for Sarah to admit her feelings for him. When the happy-go-lucky protagonist slips into a deep depression, the result is a realistic portrait of mental illness and how the love of a support network, while instrumental in recovery, cannot alone help someone shake the blues.

From a Distance should be kept close at hand by all romance lovers.

JILL ALLEN (September 23, 2013)

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