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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Gentle Annie

Anne Ravenoak
iUniverse
Unknown $0.00 (pp)
978-0-595-47176-8

Gentle Annie is a fictional story set in Australia that recounts the experiences of a spiritual being sent to earth by the Master Dreamer to help the world. She lives through three lifetimes on earth, beginning in an ancient northern civilization where she confronts early human cultural injustices. Her next journey on earth takes her to Mpartwe in the 1800s and then to the town of Coober Pedy during World War II. In each situation, she is a unique individual with special intuition that allows her to complete her mission of helping other people fulfill their life's purpose.

Throughout the book, the setting is pervasive and powerful. Upon Annie's first introduction to the Australian desert, she observes the landscape: "She stood upright, presenting less of her mahogany body to the burning sun. A piece of stringy bark from a kauri tree kept the torrid sun from her head. The pungent smell of eucalyptus assailed her nostrils, and memories of other times flooded back. Nowhere else on earth had such a captivating aroma and beauty as this ancient land." The author's love of Australia shines through her writing.

Anne Ravenoak, the pen name used by author Carol Tipler, is a retired English teacher in the University System who has written several other novels that address spiritual subject matter. Indeed, her bent towards psychic themes and healing are evident in *Gentle Annie*. Annie's identity comes from her association with the Dream Land and her direct contact with the wiley Master Dreamer; this spiritual nature is something she carries with her on earthly journeys and is shown by her healing abilities.

Ravenoak's primary strength is character development. She does a wonderful job of seamlessly integrating Annie's spiritual and physical identities, making readers believe that Annie is the incarnation of a Dream Land being who is also human. Furthermore, Annie is wonderfully complex and stands out from the other characters. The author's keen ability to juggle many characters without losing the broader themes and plot of the story shows that she can hold her own among storytellers.

The chapters that comprise the first leg of Annie's journey need work; this part of the story feels significantly less polished than the rest of the chapters, and may disenchant the reader at the outset. The themes in this section are delicate and address sensitive rites of passage and sexual issues, which should be embedded in an even stronger cultural and historical context in order to avoid turning readers off. A tighter introduction and more professional cover would help raise the book's rating. Overall, Ravenoak deserves accolades. Readers interested in historical fiction, spirituality, and women's issues will enjoy this book.

GABRIELA WORREL (February 14, 2012)

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