

Gracious Living Without Servants

Brenda Cronin

Stoneslide Books (Oct 15, 2013)

Softcover \$14.95 (376pp)

978-0-9852338-3-9

A book about ambition and consequences in many forms—love, career, family, and social status—all played out against rich and meticulously crafted scenery.

Loyalty, betrayal, love, and loss are all explored in many manifestations in Brenda Cronin's *Gracious Living Without Servants*. The story focuses on Juliet, who has left her life in Washington, DC, following the death of her husband. As a young widow living with her parents, Juliet is adrift, wondering what to do with herself and lacking the self-assurance and experience to forge ahead.

At a party given by her parents, Juliet encounters her neighbors Seth and Naomi, a high-profile couple of her parents' age who have lived next door for years. Naomi, a wealthy patroness of the arts and well-known for providing an annual dance scholarship, takes pity on Juliet and uses her influence to help her find a job as a journalist for an arts periodical. But Seth has also taken notice of Juliet, and their encounter ignites a forbidden attraction. Cronin does a wonderful job delicately introducing these lovers—Juliet at one point notices the signs of age in Seth's hands and is almost repulsed, but she is driven on, almost by sheer curiosity.

A journalist, Juliet ambitiously persuades her editor to allow her to write an article investigating Naomi, knowing that the assignment could make or break her career as well as her unlikely affair with Seth. When Juliet uncovers a scandal in Naomi's past and some questionable practices related to her trust fund, Juliet's professional life and her romance with Seth hang in the balance.

Cronin has a way of creating a sense of place, but her characters lack the same depth. The dialogue seems rehearsed in a way that moves the plot along easily but without personality. Juliet's interviews relating to her article, for instance, are perfectly summarized and lead her effortlessly from one lead to another without any shade of mystery or the plot twist readers may be waiting for.

Gracious Living Without Servants is full of guilty pleasures, and Cronin does an expert job in creating the spaces her characters inhabit. With gripping promises of betrayal and manipulation, the author delivers a good story along with a cast of characters all making adolescent decisions in adult situations. It is a book about ambition and consequences in many forms—for love, career, family, and social status—all played out against rich and meticulously crafted scenery.

SARA BUDZIK (Winter 2014)

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