

Grannie Panties are Underrated

Gayle Erickson

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This light, fun romp in which a middle-aged woman rediscovers herself is also an unexpected thriller.

Most parents probably have a few poor decisions in their past they'd rather not let their kids find out about. Thankfully most parents aren't Elle Martin, the protagonist of Gayle Erickson's *Grannie Panties Are Underrated*, who isn't just hiding a regrettable tattoo or a night in jail for getting busted with a beer in high school ... she's hiding her past in the Japanese crime world. The trouble is that this past isn't as far gone as she hoped.

Elle has a seemingly perfect all-American suburban life: an attractive husband, a loyal dog, a closet full of designer clothes, the best private school for her kids, and a fulfilling role on the SIDS Alliance board. Sure, she and her husband haven't shared a bed in ages, her relationship with her daughter is tense at best, her son has all the makings of a spoiled, rich brat, and she's almost out of Ambien, but by now she's so good at faking happiness that she sometimes fools even herself.

When her husband surprises the family with the news that they're going along with him on an upcoming business trip to Japan, Elle's current identity is set on a collision course with her previous role as the girlfriend of a violent Japanese drug dealer. Now, before she once again loses everything, Elle has to bring together a past life full of loss, cocaine, fear, excitement, and friendship with her new life of PTA meetings, boredom, and tennis matches with other stay-at-home moms.

Erickson's writing is quick and witty, with vivid characters who manage to remain distinct and memorable despite the breakneck pace of the story. Juggling two timelines, one contemporary and one made of memories from the early nineties, can be risky. Erickson pulls it off with ease; the jumps back and forth over two decades are so smooth and neat that they avoid becoming interruptive. This is particularly impressive considering that for the first two-thirds of the novel, Erickson is simultaneously describing an adrenaline-fueled descent into the underbelly of Tokyo and taking a heavily introspective look at the vapid lifestyle of America's nouveau riche.

There's a heightened element of drama and absurdity in *Grannie Panties Are Underrated*, at times entering into melodrama. While these notes of excess often work to parody American life or to create the visceral excitement of a gangster film, they can also disrupt the established flow of the story. The rejection of subtlety in the plot plays out similarly in the set dressing, where reminders of the scene's locations and time periods can become so frequent and overt that they succeed more in attracting attention than in establishing the scene.

This light, fun romp in which a middle-aged woman rediscovers herself is also an unexpected thriller that pokes fun at the excesses of wealthy social climbers. Through the daring use of melodrama and comedic extremes, Erickson is able to make Elle's elite suburban life thrilling enough to be paired successfully with her past life of adventure among the more sordid elements of society.

CONSTANCE AUGUSTA A. ZABER (October 18, 2017)

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