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Clarion Review

Mystery

Graven Images: A Singular Village Mystery
Eleanor Sullivan
Yesteryear/Wyatt-MacKenzie
978-1-939288-11-0
Four Stars (out of Five)

Engaging, fully developed characters bring us back to another century to pose thought-provoking questions about social norms and challenging authority.

Graven Images: A Singular Village Mystery, the second in a historical fiction series by Eleanor Sullivan, is a riveting novel set in an Ohio Separatist community in the 1830s. Midwife Adelaide is the village healer, and somewhat of an amateur detective.

The Separatists, a group of religious German immigrants who settled in Zoar, Ohio, live simply in log cabins without displaying any adornments in their personal appearance or in their homes. “Graven images” that worship false idols and interfere with the community’s devotion to God are considered sinful. So it is no surprise that the Separatists are suspicious when Sebastian, a traveling artist, arrives in town. When they discover he has been painting portraits of young girls in the community, the villagers become even more wary.

After Sebastian is found hanged in a local barn, outsider Egan, a traveling Irish tinker, is the primary suspect. But Adelaide is not convinced of Egan’s guilt. As others cling to their refusal to believe one of their own could commit a murder, Adelaide investigates, putting herself at risk, as she often does when fighting for the principles she believes in.

Sullivan, who has an interesting connection to the Separatists—Joseph Bimeler, the leader of the Separatists in real life and in her novels, is a distant grandfather—crafts a cohesive and complete picture of this close-knit community. They live a very structured life and strictly adhere to rules. They also have a fear of all outsiders.

Adelaide is a strong female character who is not as fearful of non-Separatists as the others are. Sullivan draws on her own experiences as a nurse to write the realistic scenarios Adelaide encounters as a midwife and healer, although some of these scenes may be too graphic

for the most squeamish. Devoted to improving her medical skills, Adelaide is equally determined to overcome some of the restrictions placed on the Separatists. There are many examples of her independent nature: seeking equality in her marriage, challenging community leaders, and keeping secrets to protect loved ones.

While the novel is well paced with active dialogue that creates vivid images of events, many characters are introduced quickly in early chapters. This requires readers to decipher the characters' roles in the community and their relationships to each other. It also takes several chapters to get acclimated to the dialects and speech patterns of the Separatists and the Irish travelers. However, once the dialogue flow becomes more familiar, it lends authenticity to the story. So the main characters become fully developed, but it takes a little while for the reader to get to know them and understand their backstories.

Readers of the first book in the series, *Cover Her Bod*y, also set in Zoar with many of the same cast members, will find the characters easier to relate to quickly. They will also have a better understanding of the crime Adelaide solves in that first novel, which is referenced throughout this narrative but is not completely clear. Readers of the first novel will have a better understanding of the characters' relationships to each other and their roles in the community from the start.

Through engaging, fully developed characters, *Graven Images* poses thought-provoking questions about social norms, adherence to rules, and the need to sometimes challenge authority—all of which are as relevant in contemporary society as they were for the Separatists in the 1830s.

Maria Siano