ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

MYSTERY

Homeschooling 1.01
Gerald Bullock
Xlibris
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Physician author weaves a web of abuse and retribution in mystery about relationships gone bad.

Craig Jernigan is a stressed-out police reporter with an explosive temper in this clever debut thriller by longtime physician Gerald Bullock. In *Homeschooling 1.01*, Craig believes he's teaching his wife, Felicia, a necessary lesson by delivering brutal beatings that leave her bruised and bleeding. What he doesn't realize, however, is that he will soon be on the receiving end of an even harsher "lesson" himself, at the hands of an unidentified vigilante determined to put an end to the cycle of domestic violence.

While this is a thriller with some satisfying twists and a challenging mystery to solve, *Homeschooling 1.01* is at its core a book about relationships gone bad. Bullock explores the insidious nature of abuse, how it can creep unrecognized into a marriage, through Craig and Felicia's relationship. "Felicia's problems with Craig had begun gradually, almost imperceptibly," writes Bullock. He shows how abuse can start small, with realistic details like Felicia carefully timing her dinner rolls to come out of the oven at the very moment Craig arrives at the front door. Avoidance tactics don't stop the beatings, though, and soon a paranoid Craig is screening phone calls and keeping a bewildered Felicia housebound.

Bullock realistically portrays episodes of abuse, some of which are effectively panic-inducing, as when Craig pulls Felicia into the laundry room to "teach" her how to wash his shirts, and she struggles to get away from the caustic bleach that's pouring down on her head. Between these raw, immediate moments, however, Bullock spends significant time explaining medical procedures and hospital politics. His expertise is obvious, but overuse of medical jargon is frustrating—no "cuts and bruises" here, only "lacerations" and "contusions"—as it takes the reader's attention away from the people in the story.

The most compelling character is perhaps the one without a name, a face, or a voice.

Bullock lets this mysterious kidnapper administer severe punishment to Craig, effectively delivering a warning that the abuse must stop, or the next lesson will be his last. But who knew about the abuse? And who would go to such lengths to stop it? That's the compelling mystery Bullock's story turns on, and there are several suspects. Craig is not a popular guy, nor are the other men who likewise go missing only to turn up bruised and battered on their own doorsteps days later. Readers will have their hunches about the identity of the vigilante, but Bullock lets the FBI sort it out one clue at a time, and he doesn't reveal the guilty party until the final pages.

Like the spider pictured on the cover of *Homeschooling 1.01* and featured in an unusual prologue, Bullock casts his web and waits for his prey to fall into the trap. While the story could benefit from more action and less exposition, Bullock's expertise on the subject of domestic violence and empathy for its victims make this a worthwhile contribution to the greater understanding of this problem.

Sheila M. Trask