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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

I Know You by Heart

Linda M. Spear
Linda Spear
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A mother's dying request rips her family apart in Linda Spear's debut novel. "Find David!" orders the mother of Sarah, narrator of *I Know You by Heart*. Naturally, Sarah, her dad, her husband, her sister Tessa, and her sister's husband are puzzled. In the time they have spent by Andrea's bedside, caring for her as she dies of cancer, the matriarch has never mentioned this person who is now seemingly so important. But Sarah takes the lead, and in investigating her mother's e-mail correspondence with David, she discovers his true meaning to her mother.

For Sarah, the week following her mother's death is a tumultuous one. Everyone's personality has changed in their grief, and emotions are running high. While Sarah tries to deal with the death of a beloved parent, she also reels from the truth she discovers about David. At the same time, other family secrets bubble to the surface about her sister and her father that will change everyone's relationships forever.

Though *I Know You by Heart* begins with Andrea's death, the novel excels at portraying her as a multi-dimensional, sympathetic character. Long flashbacks, neatly woven into the timeline of the story, and samples of her e-mails to David establish her as a witty, passionate woman, worthy of her family's and David's deep admiration.

In fact, all of Spear's characters shine with warmth and vitality. Though everyone in the pages is buffeted by storms of grief, the love between Sarah, Tessa, and their dad shows through clearly, making this story an uplifting testament to familial love.

A novel about a funeral and grief risks becoming a depressing sob story, but *I Know You by Heart* avoids this trap, not only on the strength of its character development, but also thanks to its fascinating plot mechanisms. At its heart, Spear's novel seeks to unravel the riddle at the center of Andrea's character. The clues provided by her exchanges with David draw the reader in to Sarah's search for the reasons that these two were so devoted to each other. Spear achieves a compelling fusion of mystery and family drama.

Although it is plagued by poor proofreading, *I Know You by Heart* is nevertheless stellar in its character development, deeply felt emotion, and interesting familial detective story. The book should appeal to anyone who likes their family dramas sprawling and their endings romantic and hopeful.
(February 15, 2010)

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