

Jane's Cure

D. K. Kennedy

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Disagreements regarding women's autonomy lead a midwife toward danger in the hopeful historical novel Jane's Cure.

A Canadian midwife's controversial help with terminating pregnancies inspires D. K. Kennedy's fascinating historical novel *Jane's Cure*.

In the winter of 1850, Jane awaits trial in Queen's Bay. She recounts her unconventional outsider's story in an immersive, rearward-gazing way, including her upbringing as the daughter of a fur trapper and a mother with Mi'kmaq blood. Her family moved to the hardscrabble Queen's Bay community when she was twenty-two. It was a place of frontier industry and hostility toward strangers, and she and her mother faced racism and misogyny there.

Following a typhoid outbreak, Jane was left alone and grieving. Thus, she became a midwife's apprentice. And as she absorbed midwifery knowledge—including about her mentor's views on abortion—she witnessed the domestic abuses that poorer women faced. She also made an adversary: Charles, a doctor and the husband of her dear friend Kathryn. She is jailed because her abortive herbal tincture for women's late periods proves too successful, though a short-lived LGBTQ+ romance that strains a friendship and a separate crime of retribution also pave the way toward her troubles.

Suspense gathers as Jane's account of the past catches up to the trial. Surprises arise, as well as reminders that there are seldom easy resolutions to disagreements about women's bodies and reproductive choices. And key characters are introduced at a gradual rate, with Jane making interested note of the standout features of their personalities. Charles, for instance, at first seems impractical and limited in his medical knowledge; he practices bloodletting with leeches. Still, he possesses some redeeming traits. Jane's fair-minded approach means that her later, darker revelations are all the more unsettling.

The plot intensifies because of the divide between midwifery and accepted medicine. Its resultant tension is steeped in rich, provocative misunderstandings and sympathies. Chapters that depict Jane's jail term focus on local people, including the chatty jailer, a madam who once used Jane's services, and visitors whose colorful perspectives further highlight what Jane means to the townsfolk. In between their contributions, Jane loses herself in defensive thoughts regarding her work and the gendered harms that necessitate it. Her passionate message is at its strongest when it's filtered through the stories of those whom she assists.

Jane's Cure is a thoughtful and hopeful historical novel in which a dedicated midwife faces difficulties because of her strong relationships with other women.

KAREN RIGBY (December 14, 2023)

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