Clarion Review

General

Lady Lazarus
Cheryll Crane
iUniverse
978-0-595-40608-1
Four Stars (out of Five)

Many people are surprised to learn what actually happens when a person is drowning. The person will not scream or shout. She will not wave her arms. Most drowning victims are silent because they're unable to raise their faces above water to breathe in enough air; therefore, they can't cry for help.

Water and drowning are metaphors that are carefully woven into *Lady Lazarus*, a novel that focuses on a young woman trying to balance a life with her mentally ill mother and dealing with the effects of that choice.

Cheryll Crane begins the story with the last moment of normal for nine-year-old Mattie. She watches as her father packs his bags and leaves both her and her religious, melancholic mother, Claudette. Mattie is devastated, and Claudette relocates the family to well-to-do Eloise, Illinois. There, Mattie tries to settle in, but as she grows up, her choices rarely receive her mother's approval. Over time, those decisions and a series of tragedies take their toll on Mattie, and she begins experiencing the same symptoms as her mother. When things look darkest, Mattie finds herself driven to commit a desperate act.

Throughout the book, Crane crafts richly complex characters. Lamarr, the high school basketball star, and Jacob, the preacher's son, are Mattie's lovers. Sherry is an employer whose opulent lifestyle hides a more terrifying reality. Claudette's spirituality and melancholy continually tear at Mattie's family. If these characters are drawn from personal history, Crane has a true gift for teasing drama from daily life. If not, the author has a real insight into human psychology.

Crane also has a knack for creating a mood with writing that is both saucy and poignant. For instance, in her description of Sherry, Mattie observes: “She looked hard, I thought. Regular beatings, silicone implants, and free weights toughen a person up, I guessed.”

Sometimes, however, Crane’s storytelling falters and, through Mattie, she tells the reader exactly what’s going to happen before it happens. For example, Mattie tells the reader that she became pregnant and lost her college scholarship before Crane introduces the storyline in which Mattie and Lamarr meet. Although such foreshadowing is intended to build suspense, readers already know that Mattie is set up for failure, which makes it hard to invest in the unfolding drama.

Still, because of the way Mattie’s narrative is structured, *Lady Lazarus* is a book that readers won’t be able to put down. Fans of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* may enjoy this tale of a desperate woman trying to catch her breath before the next wave washes over her.

Katerie Prior