

Life in Violet

Katherine F. Robertson

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As its lead moves from pain to healing, Life in Violet proves to be a riveting psychological novel.

Katherine F. Robertson's captivating novel *Life in Violet* dramatizes trauma, betrayal, healing, and transformation through a detailed psychological portrait that feels particularly relevant during the current "Me Too" movement.

Violet "Vi" McKay is a successful psychotherapist who leads a charmed life of coastal privilege in an inherited seaside house. She's also a woman of layers and mystery who battles feelings of pain, loss, and emptiness. Vi maintains a strict demarcation between her home office and her living space, the symbolic importance of which is not immediately apparent, though it becomes so as the story unfolds.

Her closely guarded world is shaken up because of a colleague, Doctor Stanley Nash, the powerful and charismatic head of the psychiatric unit at the local hospital. A sexual assault dredges up past traumas, prompting Vi to seek justice and take on an uncaring institution. She also embarks on a journey of self-discovery, working to cope with a past that left her reserved but stormy inside.

The book is an intimate psychological portrait, fully immersing its audience in Vi's mind. Her home is a place for observation and reflection; she keeps a journal and dream notebooks that are alluded to in the narrative, though they are not plumbed. A full, sumptuous portrait emerges through her thoughts about sessions with clients, romantic encounters, restaurant dalliances, and time at home. The text spares nothing emotionally. It includes idle fantasies and flashes of murderous rage at Nash and others who she believes deceived her, including her mentor and guardian angel Father Henry, who's there when needed to share dinner, proffer spiritual guidance, drive her home, and offer catharsis.

At times too detailed, the narrative is sometimes lost among dinner orders or the itemized contents of Vi's fridge. But this granular specificity also lends itself to insights, such as how restaurants encourage intimacy since "so many things happened over food." Prose is literary and impressive, casually tossing off deep truths about weighty matters like depression and how people cope with crises. Dialogue is sharp, realistic, and freighted with subtext.

Vi's closely observed perspective propels the story forward. The narrative is so gripping it can feel like a horror film in which audience members shout warnings at the protagonist. Foreshadowing is used to strong effect.

This is serious-minded work, with much to say about psychiatry, romance, intimacy, and violation. Characterizations are deep, even those of minor characters like Vi's former lover, a passionate actor. The narrative hints at an iceberg of backstory; it only gradually emerges, but this pacing feels authentic to the subject matter.

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JOSEPH S. PETE (June 28, 2018)

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