Clarion Review

General

Lifestone
Gary Kaschak
978-1-4389-5954-2
Four Stars (out of Five)

"With this assignment, you will learn gradually that every life is significant, that each being has a peculiar story to impart, no matter who he or she was," Professor Norwich tells his students in *Lifestone*. In Gary Kaschak's third novel, Maura Dean and Torrance Albright accept their professor's assignment to research the life of an unknown person from the past. They have no idea how profoundly they, and many others, will be affected by the results of their labors. The summer assignment becomes both a life lesson and a quest for justice.

As Maura begins her research on Destitution Ridge, the forgotten grounds of an old cemetery, she plans to tackle her assignment independently and with a customary single-mindedness. Instead, the discovery of Hope Jennins' grave leads her to work closely with historian Peter McDonnell and fellow classmate Torrance Albright, a young man whose arrogant attitude leaves her cold, but whose help she reluctantly accepts. The evolution of the students' relationship and, most notably, of Torrance's character, perfectly exemplify the lessons about acceptance, love, and compassion that they learn from Hope's story.

The novel switches seamlessly back and forth between the present-day endeavors of Maura and Torrance and the past life and times of the extraordinary woman Maura chooses for her assignment. Born in Africa, Hope Jennins barely survives her voyage to America and a subsequent life of slavery. The ostensible freedom brought about by the Civil War sends her along a path both dangerous and illuminating, in which she touches the lives of many while enduring unimaginable hardships. Her faith and perseverance leave nearly everyone she meets spiritually moved, even as her own life is overcome by tragedy and an unjust conviction for a crime she didn't commit.

Though the story itself is engrossing, the first half of the novel is hampered by a slow pace and excessive description. A few lengthy asides involving historical episodes prove distracting and bulky, and pull the reader out of Hope's tale. There are some unfortunate typos

and occasionally awkward dialogue, including Hope's rather far-fetched mastery of the language she learned only a few years earlier.

Kaschak weaves a compelling and uplifting story around the life and death of one seemingly forgotten woman. He skillfully intertwines Hope's journey with that of Maura and Torrance who, in their quest to solve the mysteries and right the wrongs of the past, ultimately find their own lives forever altered and enriched by a simple woman named Hope.

Though the novel could be shortened considerably without it unraveling, the initial leisurely pace and few grammatical stumbles do not obscure the emotional impact of Kaschak's satisfying novel. The story will resonate with the reader much the way Hope's life lessons resonate with those who knew her.