



Like a Complete Unknown

Anara Guard

New Wind Publishing (Mar 8, 2022)

Softcover \$18.99 (376pp)

978-1-929777-25-9

Against the backdrop of Chicago's counterculture, a teenage runaway and a widowed gynecologist form a bond in Anara Guard's striking novel *Like a Complete Unknown*.

Katya, the starry-eyed, artistic daughter of Polish emigrants, flees home because her parents want her to quit high school to work. Renaming herself Cathy, she becomes entangled with a beguiling young man who impregnates her. When she meets Robert, a doctor, to confirm this, she disappears before learning her test results. His concern for Cathy's welfare fed by knowledge of young women's dangerous attempts at abortions, Robert is prompted to search for her. He's assisted by Huck, a hippie whose opportunism is matched by his genuine nature.

In this braided story about isolated people who are joined by happenstance, the cast's compassion stands out. While protests about Vietnam swirl, naïve Cathy encounters people on the fringes. Her trusting nature is refreshing: despite potential dangers, her unstable sleeping situations, and her encounters on the street, she proves hopeful and resilient. Her art sustains her throughout, as both a means of obtaining the resources that she needs to survive, and as a way for her to inspire others.

Robert's grief about his wife's death wanes as he finds renewed purpose. He's introspective and astute about other people's needs, helping him to look past first appearances and reserve judgment. As he searches for Cathy, he also starts caring for young men who are haunted by the draft.

The novel moves with care toward its rewarding end. Along the way, it subverts assumptions about generational divides. Robert's patient interactions with Huck propel the second half of the novel; together, they comb the city for signs of Cathy, helping to make *Like a Complete Unknown* an engaging novel about second chances.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2022)

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