

Little By Little: The Tower Room Series

Dawn Davis

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Dawn Davis's *Little By Little* is an imaginative time travel tale that's enlivened by realistic details.

In 1929, in a shabby but lively section of Toronto, Dilys is sunk in grief. Though she's healthy, spirited, and only twenty-nine, she's crafted a living death for herself, ignoring both food and wakefulness. An excited, mysterious phone call from Gus, her jovial grifter father, shakes her from her lethargy, starting a chain of events that catapults her backward through time to Buffalo, New York, in 1850. Disoriented and shivering, Dilys is rescued by Caleb, a handsome Quaker involved in helping runaway slaves. As she joins his efforts, Dilys's grief diminishes.

The world of 1929 is established through detailed descriptions of the Makeshift Pharmacy. Owned by Gus and operated by Dilys, its soda fountain, jars of penny candy, and colorful wares suggest a world that's bursting with goods. By contrast, scant descriptions of Buffalo in 1850 suggest a sparse, gray world darkened by the shadow of slavery.

The characters reflect their times and settings well. In the Roaring Twenties, Gus is an amalgam of flamboyance, shadiness, and grand ambition. Dilys is a nurse, but also a cardsharp and gambler. Characters in Buffalo, including Dilys, are more circumscribed, their actions and ambitions limited because slavery is so present. Their conversations are authentic to their periods, and characters' actions help to convey who they are.

When it's focused on Toronto, the book is swift; scenes set in Buffalo set a slower pace. Quaker tradition is elucidated, and the evils of slavery are recorded in a didactic way; both approaches feel superfluous. A plot to foil bounty hunters is unsophisticated; plans for ensnaring them in a rigged poker game are overexplained.

Still, the portions of the novel set in Buffalo are softened because of Dilys's changes. As she becomes involved in Caleb's mission to help runaway slaves, the grief and lethargy she felt in Toronto erode. Her slow-developing relationship with Caleb, and the caring bonds that she forms with two children who've fled their abusive plantation, reawaken her spirit.

The book avoids a conclusive ending, opting to leave plot threads, relationships, and personal fates up in the air, though the future-set epilogue hints that there's more to come. *Little By Little* is an inventive time travel story that captures the essence of disparate eras well.

SUSAN WAGGONER (November 25, 2019)

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