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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ CHRISTIAN

Mapleton Murders

Sarah Jean Stewart
CreateSpace (Jun 18, 2012)
Softcover $12.95 (328pp)
978-1-4774-2936-5

Sarah Jean Stewart's mystery novel, *Mapleton Murders*, compellingly addresses issues of faith in the face of murder, rape, abduction, and terrorist attacks. Main character Kate Feeney gives voice to the fear and conflict that push Christians to hold on to God even in times of darkness.

The novel opens as two contrasting figures—a man in a suit and a man in a hooded sweatshirt—meet in a dark alley to form a plan to disable the town's nuclear power plant in order to "send the government a message." One thing is clear about the plan from the start: no one is supposed to get hurt. After the hooded figure leaves, a third person appears and speaks to the suited man. Their discussion reveals a dark twist: this is a suicide mission. Readers will be enticed by the mystery and danger, and intrigued by the identities of the three characters.

The story picks up with Kate Feeney, a small-town youth minister in Mapleton, New York. Dark events begin happening around town, and Kate is the victim of an attempted sexual assault which, along with murders that are committed in Mapleton, causes her to relive the sexual abuse and trauma she suffered as a child at the hands of her adopted father—who was also her uncle. First he tortured her pets in a drunken rage, then he turned to her. All the while, her adopted mother ignored the abuse, deepening the emotional damage. Early in the book, Kate tells her Aunt Emma about the abuse for the first time: "From the time I was three years old till I was seven, I had no one to defend me." While the revelation of this abuse comes in a quick torrent, Stewart does not overwhelm readers with the horrors of the abuse, instead letting them set the tone for the rest of the novel's action.

Amid the murderous turns of the plot, Kate clings to her morals and her faith. While Kate's Christian values work themselves out convincingly in her actions, those same values are implanted a bit too heavily in other moments of the story, like when the church deacons discuss the public school's sex-education curriculum.

Readers will admire Kate's bravery as she teams up with detective Mike Roberts to investigate the murders, even though it is clear she is the next victim because she heard the killer's voice when he attempted to rape her. After a rough start—Mike arrests Kate for criminal trespass and disturbing the peace after a demonstration at a school board meeting—Kate's partnership with Mike proves to be a calming, positive element to her life. Readers will welcome the reprieve from the trauma of Kate's past and the terror of present events. There is chemistry between the two from the start, and readers will read anxiously for romance to come to frutition.

Stewart's writing is clear and clean but a few weaknesses are evident in the book, such as the detailed physical descriptions of characters that are dropped in the moment readers meet them, and blocks of backstory inserted into present action. In fact, some of Kate's background is repeated in the first two chapters. Full character development is also lacking at points. Strangely, at times, Kate sounds more like a child than an adult, and minor characters can come across as caricatures of small-town folk.

Taken as a whole, readers will find Stewart's novel both intriguing and uplifting.

MELISSA WUSKE (October 25, 2012)

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