

Mercy: The Last New England Vampire

Sarah Thomson

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Disturbing historical events serve as the inspiration behind Sarah L. Thomson's latest book *Mercy, The Last New England Vampire*. Unlike the romanticized vampires in much popular fiction, Thompson explores the more chilling side of vampires from old New England folklore and superstition in this spooky middle-grade novel with surprising depth.

Fourteen-year-old Haley Brown has dealt with a new stepmother and a new baby brother in the last few years and now her cousin Jake's blood disease is taking a more fatal turn. Struggling to cope, her social life and grades have started to slip, but when she starts researching her family's history for a school project, she becomes absorbed in the historically true incident of Mercy Brown. Haley knows that the accusations that Mercy, who in 1892 died at nineteen of tuberculosis, was a vampire who came back from the grave are ridiculous, but is horrified and mystified by the circumstances surrounding the incident, and by the eerie, strange ways that someone is trying to communicate with her. She'll need to overcome her own fears in order to confront a true evil and save her whole family.

Thomson creates a spectacularly creepy and suspenseful mood for the book, with the paranormal incidents increasing in frequency and intensity, as Haley first begins hearing a rhythmic beating heart, then sees ghostly images on her camera, and finally has a face-to-face confrontation with ghosts and a vampire in a graveyard. The danger from this evil presence similarly becomes increasingly apparent as Haley's little brother shows signs that he will be the next victim. The general increase in tension makes the short book move very quickly, keeping it engaging for reluctant readers.

With so many vampire/paranormal books available, comparison to everything from *Twilight* to *Goosebumps* could be made, but Thomson avoids becoming hackneyed or trite by simply being authentic in her paranormal elements and her characters. The traditional New England vampire, along with the rather gruesome ritual associated with *Mercy*, are truly different and are inherently darker than some fabricated stories. The vampire Patience has more complex identity than a flat "vampire is evil" persona. The fact that she shared a simple desire, one that Haley herself felt, for an unchanging existence is actually understandable. Her hunger for life, and the lengths she would go to ensure her livelihood, is what pushes her into the realm of evil.

That connection to Patience, both familiar and emotional, is part of what makes Haley so interesting and engaging to readers. Her struggles to cope with change, death, and everyday challenges capture what many readers will deal with, grounding the horror and fantasy elements and giving her a bit more depth.

While there are a few plot stretches and hiccups, the story is engaging and interesting, and generally perfect for the recommended range of sixth to ninth grade, although younger readers might be slightly bothered by the darker elements. The glimpses into the superstition and misinformation of this period, addressed further in the author's endnote, are intriguing and can make sometimes remote parts of history come much more alive to readers of all ages. With *Mercy*, the accomplished, award-winning Thomson has another title that will strongly entice readers.

ALICIA SONDHI (October 5, 2011)

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