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Clarion Review ★★★★☆ LITERARY

## Montpelier Tomorrow

**Marylee MacDonald**
All Things That Matter Press (Aug 21, 2014)
Softcover $18.99 (318pp)
978-0-9907158-1-8

*This novel is an excellent portrait of family relationships in the face of a degenerative disease.*

*Montpelier Tomorrow* portrays caregiver burnout in the wake of bulbar onset ALS. Marylee MacDonald's novel explores frustration, grief, the relentless nature of degenerative disease, and the delicate bonds between a mother and daughter. McDonald has a talent for building motifs that express the dismantling and repair of lives permanently changed.

When Colleen Gallagher learns that her son-in-law, Tony Dimasio, has been diagnosed with ALS, the widow, kindergarten teacher, landlady, and altogether practical figure shuttles between her responsibilities in Chicago and the Dimasio home in Washington, D.C. Narrated by Colleen, the book captures the tension that arises from joining a married couple in the midst of their stress.

By default, Colleen becomes Tony's ally. His own parents remain uninvolved in the mundanities of his care, and his wife, Sandy, a working mother, delegates, struggles with the children, and masks her own loss of control over the nuclear family she idealized. The situation boils over through a steady accumulation of pressures, including disagreements on medical procedures.

Amid the chaos in her daughter's home, Colleen experiences the unexpected pleasure of helping a troubled teen—a well-drawn subplot that breathes life into the novel. A less compelling thread involves Colleen's once-potential love-interest in Vermont, who becomes intrigued by Sandy; this particular character distracts from the main plot. Home repair projects punctuate the story, serving as well-considered, concrete expressions of love, points of contention, and outlets for relief. MacDonald balances the multiple spheres of Colleen's life with a strong sense for timing scene changes.

Sandy's complaints about her mother and her challenges should be readily understood, but with frequently tense dialogue, her character doesn't quite lift off the page. Colleen herself emerges as the keystone of the novel. A self-described "person who loves for no apparent reason," Colleen's voice is carefully constructed. Her honest portrayal of powerlessness, annoyance, compassion, and humor underscore how there are no saints when it comes to long-term caregiving—only ordinary individuals trying to summon their best. Some of the more astute passages in the book express the uglier aspects of living with ALS, including the desire to escape from the patient.

*Montpelier Tomorrow* displays a talent for exploring family relationships. In the eye of a storm, Colleen is a memorable, flawed, all-too-human wellspring of strength.

KAREN RIGBY (July 31, 2015)

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