Must Read Well

Ellen Pall
Bancroft Press (Sep 13, 2022)
Hardcover $27.95 (284pp)
978-1-61088-542-3

In Ellen Pall's absorbing novel *Must Read Well*, a trip down memory lane proves to be both emotional and treacherous.

At Columbia, Elizabeth struggles to write her dissertation on famous feminist writers. She's coming up short on information about landmark novelist Anne Weil, who now lives in seclusion in Greenwich Village and refuses to answer her inquiries. When Anne places an ad for a cheap live-in tenant who will also read to her, Elizabeth jumps at the opportunity. She poses as an innocent renter, plotting to gain access to Anne's private journals and complete her research. But as Elizabeth reads the journals to Anne at her request, a buried tragedy comes to light, and an unusual bond forms between the two women.

Elizabeth narrates, and there are subtle, effective shifts in her tone as her original plan gives way to doubts, sympathy, and plain curiosity. Much of the book is also devoted to Anne's recollections of the 1960s, especially an illicit affair that's described in terms of frank sexuality and emotional tumult. In the process, parallels are drawn between Elizabeth and Anne: both are betrayers and betrayed, and they are similar in their intelligence and their passion for their work. If they have any hope of redemption, both must accept a measure of responsibility for their actions. They are flawed, but their humanity is centered.

Though the novel revolves on obsession, it also includes dark humor via Anne's sardonic personality and Elizabeth's mounting desperation. It builds toward a late twist and a resonant conclusion that indicates that people are more than the sum of their experiences. *Must Read Well* is an incisive novel about reckoning with the past.

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