Clarion Review

General

Nell
Lyn Stanley
AuthorHouse
Unknown $14.49 (204pp)
978-1-4490-2881-7
★★★★★
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Fiesty, secretive widow Nell Hannon, jumps off the pages of Lyn Stanley's delightfully intriguing new novel about Mrs. Hannon's rapport with the other inhabitants of her small Midwestern village. Although the book is called *Nell*, and the protagonist narrates in the first-person, other chapters feature the third-person point of view of many of Nell's neighbors. Nell's depressed, devious, and possibly dangerous personality comes through as she describes her side of the story. She puts on a demure, grieving façade to fool her neighbors, whom she finds meddling and obnoxious.

The book cleverly twists the notion of an unreliable narrator, with Nell being completely reliable, and those around her being oblivious. For example, readers are initially led to believe that Nell adored her devoted house-husband, Chub. Only later do they discover she is glad he met a gruesome end because his kindness irked her. Additionally, she even tried to drive him away by being shrewish, and because he insisted on being a house-husband, she never learned how to do housework. Her attempts to madden Chub failed, so she eventually gave up and pretended to be happy. As the book opens, Nell has been pretending for many years—faking sorrow and faking interest in the people she calls her friends. She has them all completely hoodwinked.

Nell is, in fact, down in the dumps, however, but not due to the loss of her husband. She tires of having to put on a show; her well-meaning neighbors aggravate her with their repeated attempts to console her and socialize. In crisp prose, Stanley accurately captures the symptoms of mental illness: the all-consuming lethargy that prevents one from doing even the simplest of tasks, the clutter that can accumulate as a result of low energy, and the desire to isolate oneself.

Nell’s depression finally lifts as she hits upon a sinister pastime.

Stanley breathes new life into the clichéd trope of the sweet old lady not being who she appears to be, by making Nell seem loveable and even justified in her actions and using the first-person voice. Nell’s businesslike demeanor contrasted with the affirmations of her sweetness from her witless neighbors provides the book with added mordant humor. The protagonist’s prickly personality offers a welcome change from the common doting grandmothers often found in literature. Abundant dialog and colorful characters make *Nell* a quick, satisfying read.

Jill Allen