Clarion Review

General

No Dress Rehearsal
Paula Aird
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

"Life…is about the journey, not the destination and it is definitely no dress rehearsal," declares a preacher in Paula Aird's ambitious third novel. *No Dress Rehearsal* examines the connections among the story's narrators, Gregory, Chanelle, Vibert, and Eldica. Simultaneously tackling familial intricacies and social issues, author Paula Aird demonstrates that, despite life's trials, people desire human connection.

Like the author, the protagonist grew up in the Caribbean, but now resides in Canada. Readers unfamiliar with the Caribbean will devour scrumptious details of the islands, as the narrators' memories of their homelands are skillfully integrated into the plot. As the story opens, adolescent Gregory flies to Canada from his home in Grenada to live with his biological father, Vibert, whom he barely knows. Gregory's stepfather abuses the boy, and his mother sends him to Vibert because she wants him to be safe. Teenage Chanelle resides in Canada with her aunt. She deals with absentee parents by gorging on junk food. Gregory and Chanelle initially meet at the airport when his plane lands, take a liking to one another, and exchange phone numbers. Through a series of mishaps, they don't reconnect until near the end of the novel. When they do reunite, Gregory has been in and out of prison and struggled with alcohol. Vibert tries to bond with his newly arrived son, while avoiding problems with his wife Eldica and their children. Vibert attempts to maintain a job, a woman's love, and his dignity. Eldica ekes out a living for her biological children, while making room in her heart for Gregory.

Aird masterfully uses the conceit of multiple narrators to her advantage. Readers see Eldica's justifiable anger at Vibert's secretive behavior, but they also empathize with Vibert, who'd rather be out drinking than go home to an angry wife. Readers understand why the down-on-his luck Vibert seeks solace in the unconditional love of another woman. It takes Aird's superior talent and bravery to let a drunken adulterer narrate his actions and still appear worthy

of compassion. Romance lovers will both sigh along with Gregory and Chanelle as they pine for each other and cheer when the two meet again at long last. The poignancy of their adolescent love rivals the schmaltzy contrived situations common in tales of separated couples.

Although she generally does well at interweaving plot details and social issues, the author's inclusion of social topics sometimes seems tacked on. In such instances, the emphasis on the issues of the day detracts from the book's fascinating story line. Missing punctuation and inappropriate italicization of names of schools, regions, and other proper nouns is also distracting. Nonetheless, *No Dress Rehearsal* is the real thing for readers seeking meaty, compelling fiction.

Jill Allen