

Pennies from Hell

D. L. Williams

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This slapstick with heart invites affection for its loyal, charming, off-the-cuff characters.

The merry band of misfits in D. L. Williams's debut novel won't let a little bad luck get them down. The characters in *Pennies from Hell*, a light, entertaining comedy of errors, are undaunted by the odds stacked against them and are eternally optimistic about their prospects for the future. All they have to do is get rich, and what easier way to do that than to win the lottery? How hard can it be? It's only six numbers! Surely this week's drawing is the one to bring fortune to the muumuu-clad Maya Marston and her quirky clan.

Late on her mortgage payments, landlady Maya plays the lottery every week, buying tickets from Gladys, who runs the register at the local convenience store. Maya hasn't won yet, but things have recently changed. She has taken in a single mother—with the unlikely name of Summer Dey—and she's pretty sure Summer's daughter, Casey, has captured the winning lotto numbers in the notebook she carries everywhere. Never mind that the five-year-old gets her numbers from a television game show. What could possibly go wrong?

Quite a lot, as it turns out, but that's half the fun. Picture elderly Maya and Gladys sliding around the backseat of a pink Cadillac driven by a heavy-footed transvestite named JoJo, scouring the city streets in search of just the right place and time to play their numbers. Riding shotgun is Maya's moocher son, Robert, and soon enough they'll pick up a wannabe robber named, of all things, Jesse James. Gladys gets sick, JoJo gets pulled over, and Maya ends up sitting on Jesse's toy gun. Dresses are torn, bodies are wrestled to the ground, and the group even pays a visit to the local emergency room.

It's slapstick with a heart, though, and one of the most delightful things about Williams's novel is that the characters have no idea how screwy their schemes are. You want to laugh, and you do, but you also feel a certain affection for these clueless folks. The weirder their story gets, the more you want them to succeed.

The action proceeds at a fairly relentless pace as the gang circumvents one obstacle after another. Secondary characters—Maya's upstairs tenant, the dashing but disturbing Brock Donovan, for instance—add interest by providing mysteries to solve while the comedic quest continues. The constant flutter of activity means that Maya never has time to really think things through. Readers may be charmed by her optimism and naïveté, but as the story progresses, the characters' lack of sophistication becomes a bit wearing. You may occasionally have an urge to sit Maya and the others down and shake some sense into them.

In the end, this oddball group doesn't really need to make sense. They're intensely loyal, incredibly tenacious, and so likable that readers will be rooting for them to find that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It doesn't come quite the way they planned, but Williams pens a satisfying surprise ending that gets them what they truly need.

SHEILA M. TRASK (August 19, 2013)

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