



Rassler's Dozen: The Year of Wrangling Sibs

Marthie Cooper

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Shirlee, with her verbal quirks, interesting backstory, and a happy and accepting nature, is a character who deserves a sequel or even a TV series.

Rassler's Dozen: The Year of Wrangling Sibs, by husband-and-wife writing team “Marthie Cooper,” is a fast-reading, lighthearted story full of colorful characters and one memorable heroine in the form of Shirlee Sargent.

Shirlee is on a mission: after being chosen by her unbeknownst-to-her half brother's mother, she's appointed to find as many far-flung siblings as she can in a year, so they can equally share in the \$21 million left to them. Shirlee approaches this task and each sibling she meets with optimism and an open heart, and is rewarded with acceptance and kindness by almost every one of the nine relatives she finds.

Hovering over the story is the birth father she never knew, the unifying thread that connects the siblings and their different mothers. He's “The Irish Masher,” Danny O'Day, heavyweight wrestling champion of the Seattle area whose heyday was the late 1940s and early '50s. He was a lover and a fighter, as evidenced by the passel of children he fathered. Despite his rambling ways, he was a kind man who left behind fond memories with the women who bore his kids. His penchant for saving scraps of paper with numbers and names provides Shirlee a few clues while simultaneously filling in blanks for the reader, as various “notes” are scattered between chapters.

It's fun traveling with Shirlee on her journey, observing her color and quirks through the eyes of buttoned-up lawyer Frank. He's an adviser and sounding board who, along the way, comes to appreciate Shirlee's ability to enjoy life's moments with a sense of humor.

The authors Cooper impart a conversational quality to their writing and give Shirlee verbal quirks and an interesting backstory. She is a woman in her midforties who, after marrying and mothering young, divorces and seizes her second chance in life to follow her acting dreams. She's introduced as she's preparing to play Marilyn Monroe in a community theater production. The protagonist is literally and figuratively on the wrong side of the road in Malibu, in the midst of debt and another dead-end relationship with a much younger man. But it is a buoyant spirit that comes through in her friendliness, meandering explanations, and topical tangents, while her speech is peppered with exclamations of “Kew!” Shirlee takes life at face value, holding back judgment, even of her jailbird sibling Amanda.

The journey to track down siblings hopscoches across the country as she locates kin, each living lives of variety and interest. There's a private-investigator brother, a burlesque club-owning knockout of a sister, and a scattering of cousins, aunts, and uncles living in a Florida bayou community.

As the saying goes, “You get what you give,” and for thoughtful, generous Shirlee, she gets unrestrained acceptance and loyalty from her newfound family. Of course, there's always a bad seed or two who threaten to crash the party and spoil the plans. Here too—which makes for a funny ending to Shirlee's “blowout-party-bash-and-will-reading-gala.”

The book cover seems foreboding, with a wrestler standing over a group of shadowed figures, and belies the brisk pace and upbeat adventure inside. Shirlee, with her happy and accepting nature, is a character who deserves a sequel or even a TV series.

FELICIA SEEBURGER (March 14, 2014)

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