ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

FANTASY

Red Roses, Bloody Snow
S.Z. Knapp
CreateSpace
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Five Stars (out of Five)

In 1867 Philadelphia, widowed Jessie O'Hara lives a solitary life working for nuns, having lost her spouse and children years before. Friendless, she now spends much of her time running errands and reading. One fateful day, the nuns send her out to fetch some red roses. On her way back to her small room, she finds herself drawn to, and bitten by, a mysterious man. Her attacker, Nathan McDonald, is an embalmer, a grave robber, and a vampire. He does not kill Jessie but instead turns her into a fellow bloodsucker. Reluctantly, the two form an alliance and then a friendship. As Jessie adjusts to her transformation, her new existence is anything but dull.

Paradoxically, the genius of *Red Roses, Bloody Snow* lies in debut author S. Z. Knapp's adherence to vampire traditions with minor but intriguing tweaks. Although Nathan uses the typical vampire allure to seduce Jessie, the two do not become lovers. Instead, they progress from mutual annoyance to an uneasy coexistence to, ultimately, a sibling-like affection coupled with a protector-protégée element.

In contrast to the quick and painless changes found in some vampire literature, Jessie's transformation from human to vampire is lengthy, feverish, and painful. The changes weaken her, and at first she is only able to sip the blood that Nathan feeds her. Jessie's warring desires to drink blood and to suppress her thirst are nuanced and play themselves out over time. Knapp's vampires differ from humans, and she makes it clear that becoming a monstrous supernatural being is, in fact, difficult.

Like many vampires, Jessie and Nathan are sexually active and physically attractive. They do not care which gender of vampire they have sex with, and they will even couple with humans. Knapp neither condemns nor overly eroticizes their sexuality. Jessie and Nathan are also rounded characters in terms of personality. The dull, lonely Jessie from the story's beginning matures into an assertive scholar. Nathan transforms from an odd bachelor to a likeable individual who appreciates Jessie's company.

Knapp introduces some original elements of vampire society. All vampires must register

with the local council and abide by rules similar to the Bible's Ten Commandments. And ancient vampires have different abilities than more modern ones. Interestingly, none of the vampires are sure of the history of their race, a welcome change from much vampire lore in which at least one individual somehow knows everything about the species.

Readers fond of stories featuring vampires and strong-willed women will sink their teeth into *Red Roses, Bloody Snow*.

Jill Allen