



Refuge

Merilyn Simonds

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Is Merilyn Simonds's *Refuge* a fictional memoir, a historical novel, or an exploration of the causes and results of seeking refuge? It's all three, as it turns out, and a mystery besides.

Questions hover over ninety-six-year-old Cass MacCallum like moths swarming a solitary light. A fragile young stranger seeks access to her island refuge; she must decide whether or not to allow her curiosity to overwhelm her distrust. Something in Cass's past fuels her suspicion and intolerance of lies, condemning her to keen awareness of those better left unidentified. Meted out in portions barely sufficient to whet the appetite, each movement on her part spawns an unquenchable hunger for more.

Cass's story alternates between her present and past without interrupting the book's flow or sense of immediacy. Metaphors reveal as much about Cass's passions and life experiences as they do about their subjects. She watches a man's fingers skim across the strings of a guitar "like swallows across the lake;" the comparison hearkens back to her childhood devotion to observing nature on and around a backwoods Canadian lake. Descriptions of how November rains lacerate the streets with ice come naturally from a character who spends her time in New York tending to the sick and injured.

Real people and events are woven into this work of fiction, enhancing its intrigue and authenticity without removing the spotlight from Cass. Cass's obsession with scientific experimentation and examination, compounded by memories of her father's maxims ("Be careful what you look for because that is what you'll find"), infuses the story with detail, insight, and depth.

Merilyn Simonds's *Refuge* compels many questions, and one final question looms: Do refuges, in their various forms, protect people from harm, or do they function as a magnet for what people most fear?

LINDA THORLAKSON (September/October 2018)

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