

Restless Secrets

Dorae Shae

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Restless Secrets is a well-wrought depiction of everyday life, even if that life is a little strange.

Restless Secrets seamlessly weaves together three novellas about the lives of very different yet all very tough and durable women.

In "The Angry Land," tenant farmers John Trezchek and Peter Ruzchuk plan their escape from a life of toil in food-starved Poland. Their end goal is Canada, where plentiful land and abundant food looks like the way out of cyclical poverty. The only problem is Elena, Peter's daughter, who is forced into an arranged marriage with John. This tradition is supposed to pull both out of poverty, but it only winds up expanding the Old World's sadness into the New.

"Violet Eyes: A Tale From Black Water Gorge" tells the story of Amethyst Reynolds, a woman who discovers that she just might be the lucky beneficiary of a sizable fortune tucked away in the mysterious hills of West Virginia. However, the money of Black Water Gorge is not a simple ladder to easy living. Amethyst discovers that dark forces are out to get her.

Finally, in "Evangeline," a farmer's daughter raised among the vineyards of British Columbia has to conceal her pregnancy or face something worse than ostracism.

Restless Secrets is a well-wrought tableau of life lived at the fringes. Author Dorae Shae gives her characters plenty of pathos, and while some of these situations are almost too prosaic to be enjoyed, her writing never fails to deliver in terms of sympathy and strong characterization that creates believable people. All of the figures in these novellas are quite different, and yet all show that the common people, especially common women, have the ability to make the pedestrian and the ordinary meaningful, with or without extraordinary circumstances.

Restless Secrets is at its best when it focuses on description rather than on action. Shae almost breaks the rules of novella writing, which have tended to favor terse, punchy prose over gushing filigree. While not exactly neo-Victorian in composition, Shae's stories focus on atmosphere, personal quirks, and a sense of place over action. Even in "Violet Eyes," the collection's most thrilling story, the almost supernatural beauty of West Virginia overpowers everything else.

The heavy descriptions in *Restless Secrets* could be seen as a drawback. This book does require a strong attention span. Still, this collection can be rewarding. Peeling layers one by one is how all of the secrets are found.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (September 18, 2017)

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