



Saint Agnes' Garden

Diana Lynn Klueh

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Saint Agnes' Garden is a pleasant, quaint coming-of-age novel about relying on faith and learning to be okay with being less than perfect.

In Diana Lynn Klueh's short, sweet novel *Saint Agnes' Garden*, a young girl finds that faith is important during her tumultuous childhood.

In the early 1950s, Jodie's parents split, and she and her mother move to her grandmother's home in Mississippi. Her grandmother, Helen, and her mother, Patricia, don't see eye-to-eye about Patricia's choices or how she raises Jodie.

Jodie narrates. She talks at length about how the women fuss at each other; the only thing they seem to agree on is the necessity of sending Jodie to Catholic school. They hope it will turn her from a spoiled Air Force brat into a lady. Jodie decides she wants to become a teaching nun when she grows up, hoping to settle the argument. Nuns, she thinks, are perfect ladies. But then Patricia takes Jodie to live with her other grandmother, Delores, in Indiana, where she meets others who face big challenges, too.

Jodie views the change as a test from God; she searches for guidance through prayer and vows that she will go back to Mississippi as a nun to teach. The novel is guided by Jodie's notion that, while some people are flowers and others are weeds, no one is perfect and everyone is loved in God's eyes. She delivers such musings in a straightforward way.

Within the story, time is marked according to instances and holidays, rather than through dates. The story can be hard to follow as a result. Jodie's internal monologue is realistic, though she glosses some details over, coming across as flighty. Other characters are less fleshed out, reduced to Jodie's impressions of them. Patricia comes across as vapid, a friend as serious, and Helen as overbearing. With these limitations, their troubles are hard to relate to.

Ponderous but limited by its perspective—that of a young woman finding her way—the book highlights a message that God loves everyone despite their flaws. This is apparent throughout without being hammered home too much, and the book is accessible even to those outside of the faith.

While the story moves at a fine pace, it is too short to track Jodie's growth fully. It reads like the opening chapters of a larger book, rather than a complete story in and of itself. Jodie's troubles are not resolved by the end, though her opinions evolve somewhat.

Wondering whether there is a place for Christians who are less than perfect, *Saint Agnes' Garden* is a pleasant, quaint coming-of-age novel.

SHANA CREANEY (July 24, 2019)

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