

Sainted in Error

Glenda Winders

Subplot

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The novel's most gripping conflicts center on questions about when loyalty becomes unhealthy and how mental illness impacts a longstanding friendship.

In Glenda Winder's psychological thriller *Sainted in Error*, a friendship formed between two college students is ravaged by mental illness, violence, and murder.

Sainted in Error begins with a short teaser scene: Maggie, the story's narrator, tries to decide what outfit to wear to the murder trial of Cynthia, her former best friend. From there, the story goes back in time to the 1970s, when the women met as college freshman and became roommates. Tension arises at the outset: Cynthia is stylish, sophisticated, and comes from a wealthy Southern California family, while Maggie is awkward and nerdy and grew up on an isolated farm.

Then Cynthia meets Richard, a premedical student. They fall in love. Maggie and Richard become friends, too. But Cynthia's moods swing from high to low, and Maggie senses danger. She begins to wonder if Cynthia is manipulating Richard.

Much of the plot revolves around the instability created by Cynthia's mental illness and how her marriage to Richard, her rise as a community leader, and Richard's professional success disguise just how ill she is. Maggie stays loyal to her first real friend, even when she's challenged by Cynthia's erratic behavior, but that loyalty can't last forever. Cynthia grows paranoid about others' intentions as her condition deteriorates, and she threatens those who are closest to her.

In the first half of the novel, characters are developed via their backstories. Maggie's inexperience with meaningful friendships as a child makes it believable that she would question whether Cynthia's erratic behavior is something a true friend should tolerate. Coming from a devout Catholic background makes Richard willing to make sacrifices to keep his marriage intact, rationalizing his tolerance for Cynthia's increasing cruelty. The second half of the novel focuses on developing Maggie more: her internal monologues revolve around boundaries and healthy relationships. These contribute significant emotional depth to the question of whether Maggie will extract herself from her tortured relationship with Cynthia.

The book's focus on the complexity of human relationships is consistent and authentic from beginning to end. Maggie's adulation of Cynthia's sophistication during their college years grows into a deeper appreciation of her friend's vulnerabilities. And sex scenes between Maggie and her partners show people overcoming awkwardness, experiencing pleasure, and navigating intimacy.

In addition to the themes of friendship, loyalty, and mental illness, the novel touches on the theme of women's fulfillment through work and careers, which becomes important to Maggie as she works to become independent enough to untangle her identity from Cynthia's. Cynthia, who blames Richard and her daughters for keeping her from finishing college, struggles with feelings of inferiority because of her dependent position as a homemaker.

Although it's a murder that sets the plot in motion, the book's most gripping conflicts center on questions about when loyalty becomes unhealthy and how mental illness impacts a longstanding friendship. These are the underlying drivers of the surface questions about what will set Cynthia on a vengeful path to murder, and who will die at her hands.

Sainted in Error is a psychological thriller positioned in a story of a long-term friendship between two women that is shredded by mental illness.

MICHELE SHARPE (November 1, 2021)

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