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Clarion Review

Family & Relationships

Secret Storms: A Mother and Daughter, Lost Then Found

Julie Mannix von Zerneck
Kathy Hatfield
Blue Blazer
Softcover $14.95 (330pp)
978-0-9857358-2-1
★★★★★
(Apr 1, 2013)

"If I am ever set free. What then? Will I crash into walls forever like a blind butterfly? Will my wings be so torn and ragged that I will be forced to limp through the rest of my life?" In *Secret Storms*, Julie Mannix von Zerneck writes of a time when she was pregnant and forced to stay in a state mental health facility, unsure of her future. She gives up her child for adoption, and for more than forty years she continues with her life, marrying the baby's father, becoming an actress and a bookstore owner, all the while dreaming of this lost child.

Kathy Hatfield, the memoir's co-author and the daughter given up for adoption, begins her life well loved with two adoring parents and both a younger and older brother. She says, "It was as if I had been dropped into the first chapter of a fairy tale—but we all know how fairy tales go." Mannix von Zerneck and Hatfield write alternating sections throughout the text, honestly portraying their lives while the thought of the other often sneaks into their minds and hearts.

The book is beautifully written and paints images for the reader when it can, such as Kathy's memory of her first phone call with her birth mother: "The fragrance of white jasmine floated in on a cool, stiff breeze, and silver moonlight spilled over the backyard." Mannix von Zerneck and Hatfield's descriptive writing styles are compelling, to the extent that readers might feel they are sitting with the authors, listening to them tell their tale.

There is quite a bit of information offered here, such as background on Julie's childhood and Kathy's years of living with a stepmother who is suffering from bipolar disorder. All of this is written in an interesting way, more like a novel than a memoir, and keeps the reader involved.

The formatting is clean and crisp, with a few sections that include black-and-white photographs that provide visuals for the setting of some of the story's events.

Julie's many years as an actress lend her an appreciation for strong story lines and word selection, which translate powerfully into her writing. Kathy is a teacher and a freelance writer, and it is evident that she values the importance of a well-crafted and complete piece. By the end of the book, readers may feel like they know the authors personally.

Secret Storms is an amazing true story and an enjoyable read. While the memoir is geared toward adult readers, it could just as easily appeal to high-school students, although a few parts contain strong language. Readers who have a vested interest in adoption, whether they are the adoptee or adopted, would be a natural audience for this book. But its appeal goes beyond the adoption issue, and the story involves even more than the connection between a mother and daughter. Truly, Mannix von Zerneck and Hatfield's tale is for anyone who values a life of family, honesty, and love.

Beth VanHouten