Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Send in the Clowns: A Love Story with a Difference
Denise M. Cull
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Three Stars (out of Five)

What springs to mind when one hears the phrase “kissing cousins?” Teenage flirtations, first romances, and stolen kisses? It’s a phase. They’ll grow out of it. But what if they don’t? What if after decades of marriage, family, and even the priesthood, the cousins still long for one another? That’s the true-life love story told by ghostwriter Denise M. Cull on behalf of her friends Eric and Eva, first cousins living worlds apart who are nonetheless inseparable.

Born and raised in liberal Sweden, young Eva was playful and adventurous. She wasn’t above playing a forbidden song in her first piano recital, or, later, sneaking a boyfriend into her nurses’ dormitory. She had a serious side, too, and pursued her nursing career with a passion that carried her around the globe to positions in Nigeria and Australia. Meanwhile, Eric was growing up in a strict, sometimes harsh, family in Pennsylvania. At only six years old, the contemplative Eric set his sights on the priesthood, a dream he later realized as a Franciscan friar. The first cousins exchanged letters for decades before finally meeting in 1993 when Eva was forty-eight, married, and the mother of two children. Eric, age fifty-seven, was dedicated to the Church. And then everything changed.

First-time author Cull varies the perspective of her storytelling, with mixed results. While Eric and Eva’s first-person narration in the opening segments allows some insight into their characters—including Eric’s profound doubts about the traditions of the Catholic Church, for instance—the device feels false, since the reader knows that neither Eric nor Eva penned these passages directly. Later, Cull turns to a third-person perspective in an effort to join the two stories. Here, though, most of the former intimacy is lost, as Cull resorts to a journalistic style, reporting on what “they” said and did. The author’s reliance on the passive voice creates further distance between the reader and Cull’s subjects.

Some scenes carry more potency than others, however. Cull does offer an intriguing

inside look at the workings of the Catholic Church through Eric's experiences and a window on the world through Eva's travels. She also captures the intensity of Eva and Eric's first encounter through the use of emotional airport dialogue worthy of a classic romance novel.

In the end, though, Eva and Eric are not fictional characters, but responsible adults faced with breaking the conventions they have relied on their whole lives. Their navigations don't always make riveting reading, but they may make the reader consider the concept of "kissing cousins" in a new light.

Sheila M. Trask