Clarion Review

Thriller

September Woods
Linda Florke
Trafford
978-1-4669-6191-3
Four Stars (out of Five)

The normally familiar woods behind fifteen-year-old Stella Compton's home become terrifying when she stumbles across the path of a dangerous escaped prisoner in *September Woods*.

Ruthlessly vicious convict Randall Daggett abducts Stella and subjects her to an abusive nightmare as he hides from authorities and searches for a secret stash of money. Escaping Daggett costs Stella far more than she could have imagined. Her recovery from the tragic incident is at the heart of the novel. As she tries to realize her dreams and possibly find love along the way, a shadow of danger continues to lurk.

Debut author Linda Florke tells a compelling and suspenseful tale, one complete with plenty of twists and turns. Readers will get to know Stella thoroughly as the story unfolds, and other characters are given the same depth and attention. Animals play important roles in the story, and Stella's dogs, in particular, are portrayed realistically.

The novel flows fairly smoothly, although the most thrilling part of the story arguably occurs during the first third of the book. In scenes describing Daggett's time in prison and Stella's abduction, the author maintains a gripping pace; readers will be fully drawn into the story, appalled at Daggett's brutality, and worried for Stella's safety. The action slows down at the conclusion of the incident, however, as Florke details several years of Stella's recovery. While some important ground is covered regarding Stella's education, occupation, and a possible romance, the story begins to drag slightly. The action picks up again in the final third of the book, when past demons begin to resurface and Stella's future is once again in peril. An unexpected twist at the end of the book is dramatic and satisfying.

Florke's writing style is uncluttered, and she has a strong talent for building suspense and narrative tension. Readers will find themselves on the edge of their seats during many of the scenes with Daggett, whose brutality is often expressed in shockingly graphic terms. Florke's

descriptions are detailed, and she effectively captures mood, as when Stella struggles to recover from her ordeal: "…she lay back down and began praying. This provided a little comfort at first, but that nagging feeling of dread began to creep in almost as if something was yet to happen. She tried to calm herself and rationalized in her mind, *I'm fine. It's over.*"

While there are few grammatical errors, paragraph breaks occasionally seem random and misplaced, and a passage in the prologue is repeated word for word further along in the story. Neither of these problems, however, detracts from the overall strength of the story line.

Florke shines most brightly in the aspects of the novel that clearly set the book in the thriller category. While the romantic and character-building aspects of the story are competently handled, readers will likely hope to see Florke's future work settle more firmly into the mystery and thriller genres. *September Woods* is a worthy read, and Florke is definitely an author to watch.

Jeannine Chartier Hanscom