**Clarion Review**

Romance

**Spirits**
Paula Graham
1st Books Library
978-1-58721-694-7
Two Stars (out of Five)

Women's reproductive health issues are controversial, irretrievably entangled with religion and politics, and fraught with intense emotion. In Spirits, Paula Graham approaches the subject of abortion through the use of heartstring-tugging sentiment. She describes her book as "a fictional romance…about the emotional struggles that two young couples face when they have to make a decision between life and death for their unborn children." While ostensibly a romance novel, Spirits is actually a gentle attempt to persuade readers that abortion is murder.

The book follows a year in the lives of two women in Iowa, twenty-seven-year-old Emma and sixteen-year-old Sarah. Neither is married; Emma lives with thirty-year-old Jake, and Sarah's boyfriend Chris is seventeen. Both men refuse to accept a baby in their lives and tell their girlfriends firmly and harshly that they must terminate their pregnancies. The stories go on to describe the poignant effects that these decisions have on their lives, feelings, and relationships.

None of the characters displays a fully-developed personality. They are defined only by their ages and roles. Emma is a church-going executive secretary whose parents are deceased. She deeply regrets her lack of family, and this feeling is intensified by her decision to obey Jake's insistence that she have an abortion. Sarah is a non-descript high-school junior who manages to muster the strength to break up with Chris after his insensitive reaction to her announcement that she's pregnant. She hates lying to her parents, but manages to do that, too.

The dialogue is stilted and artificial. No one speaks the way the characters in this book do. For example, Sarah, conversing with a girlfriend, says: "I haven't decided what career I will choose, but I do know it has to be a job that allows me to help children. What are your career plans Mandy?" When Emma asks Jake to move out, he says: "I don't want to leave. You are just tired. We have had a long day. Let's go to bed. You'll feel different after a good nights [sic]

sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning."

The "spirits" of the title are the souls of the fetuses. The author gives them voice in imagined in utero dialogues and sentimental poems like "Silent Cry": "It is the cry of unborn children / Pleading with you and me / Just give us life and liberty / and a chance to be all we can be."

The author is a retired school teacher and an avid reader. She has attempted to write an earnest novel exposing the emotional devastation that results from a woman's exercising her right to control her reproductive health, but Spirits is, instead, little more than a forced and manipulative diatribe.

*Karen McCarthy*