

Templates

Ronna Flaschner

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Men and women, mothers and daughters, love and disappointment—*Templates* gives a human heart to universal themes by focusing on the unlikely friendship between Sara and Cindy, two mothers at different stages in their lives. Sara, a pampered upper-class wife, leaves her cheating husband Drew for their lake house in Winnesquall, New Hampshire. Bitter and uncertain, she shares custody of their children with Drew, but refuses to return home. She is trapped by her inability to move on from the infidelity, and cannot decide whether to divorce Drew or reconcile with him. Her neighbor Cindy, on the other hand, is a single mother used to the rough life. She's served time, dabbled in drugs. She anxiously watches her teenage daughter, afraid that she'll follow in her own footsteps.

These two women are as opposite as night and day, but Flaschner uses their differences to show the spectrum of stresses all mothers experience. She seems more at ease when writing from Cindy's perspective—Sara can come off as stiff, her flowing inner monologue at odds with the way she speaks to the other characters. Cindy, on the other hand, is fully realized, a compelling woman. She reflects on her rough past without self-judgment, often seeking experiences that will trigger her memories. She's happy on her own, her freedom a stark contrast to Sara's emotional limbo. Flaschner shares the women's stories in long flashbacks that are pleasant to read, using dialogue to demonstrate the characters' relationships. In another novel, this technique might not work, but Flaschner is a natural storyteller, and keeps the narrative flowing.

The comparison of the friends is at times a little heavy-handed, as though Flaschner was drawing her inspiration from a parenting manual. Considering the author's significant experience in the field—she worked for 20 years as a program director for pregnant and parenting teenagers—the reliance on data is understandable, but it can also be a distraction from the rich emotional territory her characters inhabit. *Templates* is strongest when it relies on the natural tension of its themes. With this potent mix of opposites, a good story is inevitable—and all the better when allowed to stretch its wings.

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CLAIRE RUDY FOSTER (June 7, 2010)

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