

The Accidental Art Thief

Joan Schweighardt

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An uncomplicated plot and even pacing allow the understated beauty of the language and deep-feeling characters to shine.

The Accidental Art Thief, by Joan Schweighardt, is the delightful story of a woman in her middle years forced to start over, to find the will and the courage to begin a new life. With empathy, humor, and magical realism in the Mexican tradition, Schweighardt crafts a fine tale of serendipity and second chances.

Zinc is an aspiring poet and the eponymous accidental art thief. Prone to anxiety and depression, she's been living a reclusive life in a casita behind her employer's house for twenty-five years—cooking, cleaning, and providing companionship in her job as caregiver. When her employer dies suddenly, Zinc is cast out into the real world again, taking with her a painting given to her by her employer and friend.

The Accidental Art Thief is peopled with eccentric, damaged, diverse characters. In addition to Zinc, there is the greedy, angry, and vindictive daughter of Zinc's employer who wants the painting returned. Zinc's brother has cobbled together an outwardly successful life for himself and isn't particularly happy to see his sister show up needing help. A narcissistic poet hiding out on Antigua discovers Zinc online, quite by accident. And we mustn't forget the *bruja* in the Sandia Mountains who communes with spirits.

Birds—peacocks, grackles, hummingbirds—occupy a special place here. As a component of magical realism, the birds are portents of the future, offering both warning and encouragement. A romance for Zinc initially appears incongruent for her character, however, she is finding herself and discovering strengths she was unaware of, so the romance is simply another manifestation of that journey.

There is much humor, some of it gentle and droll, and also sharp barbs, as when one of the minor characters says of her alcoholic husband, "It'd be easier—and cheaper—if he took it intravenously, out of a barrel on a dolly, so that he could drag it around with him."

Schweighardt is a talented author who has written a multifaceted story ripe with symbolism, offering hope in the face of death and possibility in forgiveness.

MICHELLE NEWBY (Fall 2015)

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