

The Highmore Circle

Cricket Reynolds

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Friendship and past challenges factor in to this romance novel that happily tests genre boundaries.

Cricket Reynolds delves into the romantic life of a college professor with a troubled family past in *The Highmore Circle*, a novel that breaks genre rules to pleasing effect.

Her mother dies when Gracie is young. With her grieving father closed off to her emotionally, she grows up with unanswered questions that impact her into adulthood and into her career as an English professor.

Gracie's best friend Chloe signs her up for the Highmore Circle, a support group for women whose mothers have died. Gracie is not used to sharing her feelings, but the group welcomes her in and she makes friends, including an unexpected one: the wealthy, handsome brother of one of the Circle's members. Jack comes on strong, and Gracie is immediately smitten. Yet each has lost their mother and each has a past love that lingers as a stumbling block. It also happens that Gracie's stumbling block has just reappeared in her life at exactly the wrong moment.

Parts of the book flirt with genre clichés, but the story also deals with more serious themes: difficult relationships, cheating, a parent's death, family secrets, and abandonment. All of these elements shape Gracie's low self-esteem, making her unsure of herself.

While Gracie tries to decide between the two men who love her, the story is at times open-hearted, frustrating, renewing, and romantic. Reynolds does such a good job of creating confusion about each man's value and motivations that when Gracie at last makes a decision, it might be an unexpected one.

Writing is straightforward, and the story is absorbing. Characters are clearly differentiated through dialogue, action, and clothing, making them so vivid that the heroine sometimes pales beside them. Most of them feel real, with the exception of Gracie's grandmother, whose insults and controlling nature make her two-dimensional, and Angie, Jack's fashion-model ex-wife.

There's a little more psychology here, and a lot less sex, than in a typical romance novel. Sex scenes are written with subtlety, leaving much to the imagination. Some dialogue goes on too long, driving the point farther than it needs to go. Yet the prose is self-assured and modern, with a touch of humor that feels heartfelt and true.

The Highmore Circle is a romance novel that tests the boundaries of the genre in a great way.

PETREA BURCHARD (February 17, 2017)

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