ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

The Lace Reader
Brunonia Barry
William Morrow
978-0-06-162476-6
Five Stars (out of Five)

The Lace Reader accomplishes the rare feat of combining an interesting premise with a gripping storyline that keeps readers guessing until the end. Set against the background of Salem's Puritan and lace-making past the novel also introduces readers to the charms and isolation of Massachusetts' "border" islands where inhabitants can pull their ramps up thereby preventing anyone from landing. Amidst these conditions the imagination can play tricks on the mind.

Barry who is also a screenwriter tells the story in a series of powerful vignettes that move back and forth in time. Unreliable narrator Towner Whitney tells her own story even though there are "gaps" in her memory. Towner comes from an old Salem family known for a tendency toward quirkiness and an uncanny ability to read lace. All of the Whitney women from old Aunt Eva to reclusive May can read lace.

What Towner sees in the lace on her seventeenth birthday is so disturbing she nearly loses her mind. Exactly what causes Towner's mental breakdown is just one of the many mysteries in this multi-layered gem. Switching deftly between first and third person Barry also introduces Detective Rafferty a burned-out cop from New York City who simultaneously investigates the strange death of Towner's eccentric great Aunt Eva and the bizarre disappearance of Angela Rickey.

Towner and Rafferty while tentatively exploring a relationship of their own must also contend with two warring factions—the witches who inhabit Salem and the Calvinists a cult-like group headed by Cal Boynton. Boynton's robed disciples who lead modern day witch hunts take aim at Towner in one of the novel's climatic scenes. Towner must rely on her own ingenuity along with a conscious reinterpretation of the past to free herself.

Though the number of victims in *Lace Reader*—runaways alcoholics agoraphobics cult adherents and battered women—can be off-putting to some Barry's message is hopeful. Not everyone can free themselves from the lace's destructive pattern but at least one of them Towner makes a heroic effort. In a showdown with Cal one of the most villainous characters in all of

literature Towner decides “everything that happens from here on out is up to me.”

This thought-provoking novel walks the line between reality and unreality. Filled with perpetrators victims tourists and hucksters townies and yuppies it is also brimming with mysticism. If readers wish to be taken for a dark bumpy ride with lots of plot twists and a great deal of mystery chances are they will enjoy the places this novel takes them.