

The Ninth Session: A Psychological Suspense Novel

Deborah Serani

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Deborah Serani's thriller *The Ninth Session* pits a psychologist against a secretive new patient and her own conscience.

Psychologist Alicia's job is to help her patients overcome past traumas and live happier, healthier lives. But ever since her husband's death, Alicia has felt unbalanced and adrift, unable to trust her own sensibilities. Her life becomes even more difficult when she begins seeing Luke, a new patient with a shocking secret. The deeper she digs into Luke's case, the more Alicia struggles to keep her head above water and to maintain her professional standards.

Formatted in a session-by-session way, in which each of Alicia and Luke's meetings reveals a little more about his past and problems, the story builds tension as it counts down to the fateful ninth session. Alicia and Luke's conversations are tense and well paced, interspersed with scenes from Alicia's personal life that proffer insights into her personality, doubts, and problems.

Alicia is sympathetic—more so in her struggles than in her decisions—but irresponsible. She is suspicious of Luke even before having reason to be. She recognizes that her struggles to cope with her husband's death are probably responsible for her unease, but acts upon her suspicions with speed, violating Luke's trust and privacy. Her later actions may also be interpreted as wrong, though she has more concrete reasons for them. Debates regarding Alicia's later actions and their consequences are an interesting, integral, and complex part of the story.

Characters' actions and reactions direct the rising tension, and the book's dark mood is enhanced by atmospheric details around nighttime settings and light filtering through window blinds. Descriptions and depictions of the world of psychology are integrated well and ground the story in reality. Alicia's family is deaf, and the incorporation of aspects of deaf culture is fascinating.

Concluding notions regarding abuse victims are questionable, as are excuses made for a character's violent behavior; off-puttingly, sympathy is invited for someone who commits horrendous crimes. An unpredictable twist near the end is satisfying, but most fulfilling is Alicia's development and ultimate handling of past mistakes.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (September 25, 2019)

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