



The Other New Girl

LB Gschwandtner

She Writes Press (Sep 26, 2017)

Softcover \$16.95 (304pp)

978-1-63152-306-9

The Other New Girl is a suspenseful, absorbing, literary exploration of life, death, and the stuff that happens in between.

The Other New Girl is much more than a suspense-fueled coming-of-age novel. L. B. Gschwandtner employs mystery and metaphor to excavate relationships within a unique community. The truths she ultimately exposes—unadulterated by environment, era, or age—prove to be universal.

The story, related decades after the fact by Greenwood, one of two new girls who joined a Quaker boarding school's co-ed class, is launched with an abundance of intrigue about what happened to "the other new girl." More immediate mysteries and relationships quickly demote the other girl, though. In the first two thirds of the book, she is as insignificant as a character as she was insignificant to her classmates for the majority of her first semester.

The other new girl earns her appellation by being so bland in appearance and personality that nobody, except Greenwood, knows her name. Until she becomes conspicuous through her absence, Moll is not anything more than an occasional, passive presence in the story.

The book's metaphors and descriptions of people and places are as evocative as they are unobtrusive, enhancing the plot and character development without sacrificing momentum. Even graphic metaphors, such as "After it was all over, a bloodstain the size of a VW Beetle covered the floor under her bed," modestly serve as reminders of the era.

Individuals are fleshed out within moments of being introduced through the distinctive features—whether a name, demeanor, quirk, favorite object, or dearest diversion—that best epitomize their complexities. In rare instances, setting descriptions impede forward movement by focusing too much on nearby structures or landscapes that are irrelevant to the book's current trajectory.

Greenwood is a grandmother by the time she narrates the story. She skips forward and backward through her lifetime as she untangles the most alluring loose threads, tugging at suspiciously taut ones to see where they might lead.

Suspense emanates as much from strategic gaps in the chronology as it does from the judicious foreshadowing of events yet to take place in the girls' story. Scenes are deftly managed, dropping in and out of sequence in an engaging way. In a few scenes, the sequence is murky, but by the time frustration threatens to pounce, the fog has already lifted.

Just as the other new girl is remembered more for her absence than for her presence, Greenwood's story is all about the self-discovery that comes from sifting truth out from expectations. Who Greenwood becomes has little to do with who she thought she was as a teen and everything to do with how she discovered who she was not.

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LINDA THORLAKSON (November 28, 2017)

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