

The Peculiar Miracles of Antoinette Martin

Stephanie Knipper

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Stephanie Knipper's novel treats autism spectrum disorders with dignity and compassion.

The little girl at the center of Stephanie Knipper's magical new novel, *The Peculiar Miracles of Antoinette Martin*, is afflicted with the gift of differences. As she moves with silent grace through daily life on a flower farm, she proves to be the point around which all of her family's troubles reconverge.

The world outside of Eden Farms knows Antoinette is different. She is slight, lovely, and uncommunicative, living with a severe form of autism that prevents her from speaking, except within the confines of her mind, where she proves to be an empathetic and hopeful girl. Her mother, Rose, does all she can to be sure that no one understands Antoinette's precise differences, though—as they include an ability to heal, but one that takes a tremendous toll on the little girl. Hers are gifts better left unused.

Rose's failing health means that she must draw someone else into her daughter's life, though, and her estranged sister, Lily, is tapped to take on the maternal role in her stead. Lily is herself autistic, though highly functioning, and fled the farm years ago to protect herself from the pain of a lost love and the discomfort of seeing her niece suffer a more severe version of her own challenges. Before time runs out, Lily must mend fractured bonds, learn how to take care of her niece and the farm, and become adept at keeping Eden's secrets hidden.

The Peculiar Miracles weaves toward its inevitable conclusion with sweetness and regret, recalling past pains and pushing its lead characters toward shining new chances at love, both familial and romantic. Antoinette's internal dialogues prove to be its loveliest passages, as she seeks the music in the world around her and reaches out to smooth the particular tunes of the people she loves most. The text is further enlivened by meaningful descriptions of Eden Farm's flowers, and of the beauty they add to its inhabitants' lives. Stephanie Knipper's novel treats autism spectrum disorders with dignity and compassion, making them the gift in a family story that otherwise threatens to go terribly awry.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Fall 2016)

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