ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

The Six Granddaughters of Cecil Slaughter
Susan Hahn
Fifth Star Press
978-0-9846510-0-9
(Sep 1, 2012)

Imagine being able to talk from the grave, reflecting on your behavior, your life, and your friends and family. This is the premise of Susan Hahn's novel about a family of Hungarian Jewish immigrants who settle in Chicago and struggle to make the American dream a reality while still honoring their traditions and ancestors.

One aspect of this honor involves naming the six granddaughters of Cecil Slaughter after their grandfather, in choosing names that echo his: Ceci, Cecilia, Celine, Cecily, Celie, and Celeste. Ceci died as a young adult, and the story is narrated in her voice, speaking from the grave as she watches the antics of her above-ground family members. This is an eerie yet entertaining concept, and the insights she observes are profound and poignant.

"The dead are not necessarily serene," she says. "We bring with us our unfinished business—our angers about being treated badly, our unfulfilled ambitions, our unrequited longings about love—the innumerable hungers and unresolved issues of the flesh."

It seems that all the granddaughters—with the exception of Celeste, who died as an infant—are more than a little off-balance. Cecilia is a talented, well-known poet with an obsessive personality, and her dispensation to the dark side only worsens after she is brutally raped. No matter how much she writes, she feels she cannot purge herself of the dirt left behind on her body by the man she calls Herr M., her rapist.

Celie, just as off-balanced but in a different way, works in a boutique frequented by "educated, rich, bored, frustrated, freaky-thin women who are dismayed that they have wound up being such clichés." Celie makes her customers feel hopeful—"that the next item she brings them to try on will most certainly reinvent them. That suddenly they will see themselves in the mirror as they want to be seen."

Statements like these pepper the novel and are easily applied to a reader's personal experience, which makes them all the more entertaining, relevant, and insightful.

At times it can be difficult to follow the various characters because of the closeness of their names and the depth with which Hahn delves into the past and present circumstances that

have shaped each one. But the author is a masterful storyteller and her tale, given its movement between those living and those dead, is unique and intriguing.

Lauren Kramer