

The Spa at Lavender Lane

Phyllis Melhado

Black Rose Writing (May 7, 2020)

Softcover \$18.95 (250pp)

978-1-68433-464-3

The Spa at Lavender Lane is a charming novel about women at a crossroads and the desires that they hide under their beautiful surfaces.

In Phyllis Melhado's entertaining ensemble novel, *The Spa at Lavender Lane*, women bond during a ten-day Palm Springs retreat, enjoying luxury, gossip, dreams, and new friendships.

Nadia, a legend who's in her seventies, and her assistant Phoebe both know the art of discretion and diversion. They run Lavender Lane, a place of escape for the rich. Their current guests include a former model, Mavis; an overweight Texan, Charlotte, who brings with her her daughter, Lauren; Toni, who quit her job as a fashion buyer; and Eleanor, the face of a brand who's hiding her botched plastic surgery.

Mavis absorbs everyone's ire. Though she's an archetypal schemer, she behaves in ways that are unsubtle rather than shrewd. Others, including Eleanor, function in a limited way; Eleanor is present most to convey Nadia's history, which is fascinating but incidental. Within the spa's confines, the cast mixes ambition with sweet nurturing.

As they gather over spartan but healthy meals, exercise, and scented spa treatments, the women find that they all love Lavender Lane—so much so that they're reluctant to leave. When Nadia dies from a heart attack, everyone weighs how they might benefit from, or adapt because of, her exit. Phoebe always hoped that her loyalty would be rewarded; Mavis had planned to launch an advertising campaign based on the spa's face cream, but now her hopes are crushed. But Nadia's son, Peter, is the one who will decide the spa's fate.

It's a fun, contrived plot that sets the cat among the pigeons until the women realize that Peter is no adversary: he's handsome, single, and desirable. The women's ploys to land in Peter's good graces are variously sincere, funny, and indicative of determination. Mavis's machinations temporarily win out, but by checkout time, Lavender Lane's in solid hands again as its guests resolve their problems. There's an unrealistic tidiness involved in the conclusion, which underscores ideas that the spa treats people as more than just customers and that a brief rest can spark fresh insights.

The book's conversations are sometimes idle and sometimes confessional; the women's exchanges reveal their suppressed or overindulged longings. Their backstories are relayed, but are described in glib terms and in ways that poke fun at the middle-aged and rich. The women's story lines often gather around single traits—like Charlotte's weakness for food; Lauren's youthful, dismissive attitude toward her mother; and Mavis's haughty superiority—in ways that are exaggerated and repetitive, edging toward satire.

Leaving a lasting impression because of its serene, enclosed setting and its luscious, sensory appeal, *The Spa at Lavender Lane* is a charming novel about women at a crossroads and the desires that they hide under their beautiful surfaces.

KAREN RIGBY (March 17, 2020)

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