



Unauthored Letters

Tara C. Allred

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Incidents connected to a woman's traumatic youth threaten to destroy her marriage in Tara C. Allred's suspenseful psychological novel, *Unauthored Letters*.

Orphaned at age fifteen when her mentally unstable father commits suicide, Rebecca Brownell marries her guardian, Rick Downley. Five years later, she obsessively cuddles an imaginary infant son she calls Robert, her father's name. Sent to a mental hospital by Downley, who controls her inherited wealth, Rebecca slowly recovers. When finally well enough to leave the hospital, by then a penniless widow, Rebecca yearns for a real marriage and children, and John Sanders, one of her former therapists, proposes, certain he can separate his role as her therapist from that of her husband. Rebecca and John have a son, but soon thereafter, a mysterious stranger appears near their home, and Rebecca receives cryptic letters referencing her past.

Allred shows excellent insight into the psychological interactions of her characters and doesn't ignore the judgmental errors therapists sometimes make. John experiences this conundrum after he marries Rebecca, struggling to remain objective as she appears to suffer a mental relapse. He balks at naming their son Robert because he lacks respect for Rebecca's father, who left her in Downley's untrustworthy care. "John did not understand Rebecca's father, his ways, or the depth of the sickness that trapped him," Allred writes. "Yet it was his profession to support those afflicted with illness."

Use of symbolism adds depth of interest to this well-constructed story. The Sanders family moves to a new home on Chimera Lane, trusting that their marriage will continue to thrive. There, they begin to manifest the darker sides of their natures: John's obsession about Rebecca's possible retreat from reality and Rebecca's reactive emotional outbursts. In one scene, a violent storm reflects the rage they direct at one another inside the house.

Skillful placement of descriptive detail enlivens scenes and shows nuances of personality without slowing the story's forward movement. For example, John decides to close the widening gulf between his wife and himself by rekindling the positive feelings they once shared. He takes Rebecca on an outing in nature without revealing their destination. His playful mood lightens her own outlook: "He led her forward, stepped onto the bridge, and watched her face light up in surprise. They stood in an oasis of ladybugs."

This second novel by Allred takes place from 1984 to 2002 and realistically depicts her characters' growth through a variety of emotions, motivations, and behavior. Rebecca and John are especially well drawn, as is John's friend Randy, a jovial guy with a strange sense of humor and steadfast nature. The story's progression lags somewhat toward the end as John agonizes over Rebecca. A dream sequence that prompts him to read Rebecca's father's diaries and thus gain compassion for his failings does not ring as true as other scenes.

Unauthored Letters offers an informed and empathetic look at mental illness through a gripping mystery of greed and redemption.

MARGARET CULLISON (March 4, 2014)

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