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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ LITERARY

Wayfaring Stranger

Nancy Lyn Sullivan
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Nancy Lyn Sullivan firmly establishes a place for herself within the genre of magical realism in her novel *Wayfaring Stranger*. Readers will be delighted with this well-written offering and will enjoy traveling with its likable main character, Sophie, as she visits England, China, Russia, and more. Sullivan is obviously familiar with all of Sophie's destinations, as she writes about them with exquisite detail that resonates with authenticity.

The premise of Sullivan's novel is an intriguing one. Certain unhappy, dissatisfied people who leave or run away from their unfulfilling circumstances find themselves among a special group known as "travelers." Travelers cross time and space boundaries and unwittingly find themselves in unintended new places, faced with unexpected challenges that ultimately help them both comprehend and discover what they are seeking. Aside from the "travel" itself, the story is perfectly logical and relatable.

Sullivan introduces Sophie as a young wife with a stepson whom she loves dearly, but a husband who is not only inattentive but also unfaithful. Her "whole life … is shaking, teetering on some edge." One morning, following an argument, Sophie leaves her home in the Massachusetts suburbs for a one-hour trip to a business meeting in the city. She falls asleep on the train and inexplicably wakes up in London; even the American dollars in her wallet are now British pounds.

What Sophie experiences in London, followed by further time and place boundary-crossing trips, seems to suggest that "losing everything familiar" is her destiny; fellow travelers she encounters along the way help her to see that she can return home, but only once she is ready. "You've got to finish the journey you're on before you can go back," one of them tells her.

Sullivan develops Sophie's persona so skillfully that readers can actually imagine themselves in the young woman's position. Sophie's reactions to the illogical but ongoing changes in her life are both reasonable and realistic. The other characters Sophie encounters in her travels are just as superbly rendered, from the Chinese Li-Lin to the Russian Sergei. Sullivan injects humor and pathos into all of them, giving each character distinct, believable qualities.

The dialogue among the characters is also well written, and unspoken communication between people, especially those who do not speak the same language, is expressed thoughtfully and convincingly. Sullivan shows a true understanding of the universality of human nature, and her character depictions transcend both nationality and culture.

For those who appreciate magical realism, *Wayfaring Stranger* offers an engrossing story that is certain to please. Likable characters and fascinating detail about foreign locales, customs, and food contribute to a most enjoyable read. Even those new to the genre might want to give this novel a try, as it features an engaging plotline and would make for a fine introduction to this literary style. Realists who cannot or do not care to delve into worlds where the sincerely improbable must be accepted as possible will not be satisfied. With some text corrections, *Wayfaring Stranger* would likely be a five-star book.

CHERYL M. HIBBARD (August 20, 2012)

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