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Avey's "The trials of Nellie Belle" (Book Review)

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Book Reviews



Avey, S. (2017). *The trials of Nellie Belle*. Durham, NC: Torchflame Books. 248 pp. \$6.99.

Sydney Avey's second historical novel, *The Trials of Nellie Belle*, is a fascinating glimpse into the life of "a progressive woman." Avey has an aptitude for portraying strong women candidly and with extraordinary detail. Their stories and influence are the more captivating because they are set against historical backdrops that often marginalized independent women. Nellie is the focus of the first portion of the novel. From the opening line of the book, readers share in her trials in a double sense. Hardship and doubt follow her quest for freedom for societal norms, but her skill as stenographer open up another set of trials. Her aptitude propels her into court reporting career and she tells stories from the trials she reports. As Nellie writes in her journal, "Stories are a library of life the locusts cannot destroy." Each one is an absorbing vignette that illustrates a point, moves the plot along, or give encouragement to another character. Avey cleverly uses them to provide an intense Polaroid of the historical context without unnecessarily cluttering the character's lives.

Though there is a romantic quality to the occasionally biographical narratives in this book, they are not sappy in any way. Nellie's journal and letters honestly display the rewarding and regrettable consequence of each choice in her life. Avey carries the reflections further using the lives of Nellie's daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter; the span of the stories give the lessons contemporary relevance. A minor drifter character voices the wise heart of this book: "You can't change anything if you don't change yourself first. And you can't change yourself if you don't know what you lack." Every generation's story is an engrossing revelation of that quest and each one provides a memorable path for the reader's enjoyment and self-reflection.

Reviewer

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