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A Curious Beginning



Synopsis

London, 1887. As the city prepares to celebrate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee, Veronica Speedwell is marking a milestone of her own. After burying her spinster aunt, the orphaned Veronica is free to resume her world travels in pursuit of scientific inquiry - and the occasional romantic dalliance. As familiar with hunting butterflies as she is fending off admirers, Veronica wields her butterfly net and a sharpened hatpin with equal aplomb, and with her last connection to England now gone, she intends to embark upon the journey of a lifetime. But fate has other plans, as Veronica discovers when she thwarts her own abduction with the help of an enigmatic German baron with ties to her mysterious past. Promising to reveal in time what he knows of the plot against her, the baron offers her temporary sanctuary in the care of his friend Stoker - a reclusive natural historian as intriguing as he is bad-tempered. But before the baron can deliver on his tantalizing vow to reveal the secrets he has concealed for decades, he is found murdered. Suddenly Veronica and Stoker are forced to go on the run from an elusive assailant, wary partners in search of the villainous truth.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I should say straight off that I loved the Julia Grey books, and was sad when I read on Deanna's blog that the series had come to an end. Unfortunately, this series doesn't hold up quite as well. Though the book was enjoyable enough, the mystery was rather subpar, the backstories often didn't make sense, and I was left unimpressed by Veronica as a character. I seem to be in the minority, but

I didn't particularly like Veronica. I am all for the Amelia Peabody-esque woman who takes charge and flouts convention, but there is a fine line between being a bad*ss and being a jerk. The fact that this book opens with Veronica lamenting the fact that she can't shed a tear over the grave of a woman who adopted her immediately set Veronica in the latter camp for me. She is eye-twitchingly narcissistic, oftentimes rude, and jarringly devoid of empathy. However, what bothered me the most is that even though she is simply the cleverest of all clever Victorian Mary-Sues, she has an appalling lack of critical thinking. I am no stranger to the character who can't figure out what the reader has deduced fifty pages earlier, and normally it doesn't bother me. But it is rather grating going through pages of Veronica bragging about her superior talents in morse code, embalming, and escaping kidnappers when she can't figure out the obvious, like there *might* be something suspicious about her adopted aunts' habit of changing addresses every six months or that the "robber" that stole nothing and tried pull her into an awaiting carriage might not have been a robber but a would-be abductor. It takes Veronica 3/4 of the book to accept this. It takes a clever reader two pages, a less clever reader three, and the most sleep-deprived and/or intoxicated reader four, where it is helpfully pointed out by a secondary character. That's not to say that she doesn't have her moments. But they are far and few between. Fortunately, the other characters in the book are much more pleasant. Stoker is your typical dishonorable Honourable with a heart of gold. Other characters were similar tropes, but Raybourn's good dialogue keeps them from being routine. The second aspect that I didn't like was that the backstories of characters didn't seem to line up well. Veronica is about 24, and yet has visited (off the top of my head) Switzerland, Ireland, Italy, Costa Rica, Sumatra, Java, Mexico, Malaysia, Sicily, Corsica, the Rocky Mountains, and South America. I mean, it's technically not impossible, but combined with time back in England to care for both sickly aunts, it just seemed way too unrealistic. Stoker is the same way--he has five different histories (knife thrower, explorer, surgeon, taxonomist, etc) though as he is older and left home at 12, I give him more leeway to have cultivated an interesting backstory. Finally, the mystery just wasn't particularly good. An orphan main character in a mystery is bound to have an interesting parent or two. It's just how it works, so the fact that the mystery was centered on this reveal was a letdown. The action scene at the end had a similar "eh" feel, and was based on the laughable premise that bad guys and the police would not immediately rush to a place where they know their intended victim/suspect is, but instead wait several hours because VERONICA ASKED THEM TO COME AT 9 AND EVEN SENT OUT INVITATIONS, OKAY? That said, it was a fine enough read and I have hopes that Raybourn will make her follow up better. Plus, the cover art is cool.

This comes close to a 2 star rating for me. Perhaps out of fondness for the hours of enjoyment Ms Raybourn's previous works have me feeling a bit generous. I really came close to just closing the cover on this book many times in the reading of it. It has an easy prose and has the typical simplicity Raybourn employs usually to her advantage. It is a straight forward first person narrative that worked well in the first couple of Julia Gray novels. Here though I found Veronica to be a smug know it all who has the most amazing abilities and perceptions. Not to mention annoyingly modern. Yes Raybourn uses her otherwise impeccable standards of place and time here. The setting feels authentic. But Veronica does not. She is too perfect in a way that just drains the life and charm out of the book for me. Coupled with this cloying perfection and flatness in character comes the predictable love interest that lacks any charm or mystique. Veronica's grand abilities that seem to almost border on the supernatural (she can tell when people lie just by their faces using 'modern' Darwinian logic and other such scientific methods) and often just felt ridiculous. She is always one or more steps ahead of everyone else and as a the narrator of the story, her story, it feels like the book is in the hands of the simpering little irritating person who raises her hand in class at everything and even if someone else answers declares she knew it better. This might be the last straw for an author whose work I have felt is slowly but surely becoming almost a parody of itself. I remember how much fun I thought her first two books were. How enjoyable the next couple were. But more and more I feel that Raybourn is writing almost mythical female characters who simply are way too perfectly modern for the settings she still does an admirable job of crafting. They have become too glib of a vehicle for trying to rewrite the wrongs of the past with a fictional character having all the 'right' convictions and abilities for the wrongs of that time. (For some reason spellcheck wanted Victoria instead of Veronica, I think I fixed all of them but if there is one still hidden above, my apologies)

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