
This book is an inspiration for all of you who sit through your high school English classes listening to the teacher recite poetry and wishing you were elsewhere. Med Woltzter tells of a sophomore at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, Claire, who becomes obsessed with the poetry of Lucy Ascher. Ascher committed suicide when she was about 18, but her poem is filled with meaning on every level.

In fact, Claire and two of her friends are so absorbed with poetry about pain and death (although not necessarily the same poetries) that they are nicknamed the "death girls." Throughout the whole novel Woltzter maintains an air of believability except for one point. I have never been to Swarthmore but I cannot imagine a place so strange that three girls could acquire such a nickname and have it universally known. They even dress alike in black turtleneck sweaters. Do you get the feeling that a subtle cliché is building here?

Anyway, the story opens with the "death girls" in the middle of one of their all night poetry reading sessions. You don't find out that these girls sleep at all until about two a.m. through the book. The book contains similar instances where you have to just accept things and wait until later for the logical explanation. It seems that (sigh) things are disturbed, and Claire is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and Naomi is bored.

If you think that the situation is just going to degenerate into utter chaos, I should tell you that these girls do manage to solve their immediate problems, alter a fashion. Laura stops attending classes and starts going to see a psychiatrist. Claire starts sleeping at night and decides to let her bleached hair grow out. And Naomi takes a lover named Julian. Julian is fascinated by Claire. He questions her about the obsession and even goes to see a psychiatrist himself. In fact, her bleached hair grows out. And Naomi is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and Naomi is bored.

You have many of your questions which crop up in the first two chapters answered. You would have been better if there had been some kind of order. A person who isn't concentrating could be caught off guard and have a little trouble figuring out just what year it is.

However, all in all, this is an interesting story if you care what effect death of a close relative or friend has on those who are left alive. Also, it is an interesting study of the effect of death on those who die just before the end comes. And don't worry. You won't have to think back to your high school English classes since this is a study of people and not poetry.

Bill Gifford