2008

The Locked Garden

Ruth-Anne Brown

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Reviewer: Alison Canar  
Reading Level: Intermediate, Young adult  
Rating: Excellent  
Genre: Historical fiction;  
Subject: Psychiatric hospitals--Juvenile fiction; Mental illness--Juvenile fiction; Single-parent families--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

Is an insane asylum a suitable place to raise children? Verna's Aunt Maude asks this question when her brother-in-law, a psychiatrist, brings his family to live on the grounds of an institution. Following the death of their mother, Aunt Maude comes to the institution to look after the upbringing of Verna and her younger sister, Carlie. Maude, stern and uptight, continues to keep the family in a dreary state of mourning. Luckily, the girls find happiness by spending time with a patient named Eleanor. Maude is jealous of the family's love for this young woman, and her cruelty gradually drives Eleanor from the brink of contentment back to the depths of depression. Verna and Carlie show their father how much their aunt has hurt Eleanor, and, in the end, he sends Maude away.

*The Locked Garden* is a well-crafted period piece which explores stereotypes and the effects that human beings can have on one another. The story takes place at the beginning of the 20th century, when attitudes about mental illness were just beginning to evolve. Dr. Thurston, director of the asylum, believes that a beautiful environment will eventually penetrate the patients' troubled minds. Verna's father believes that diseases of the mind can be treated just like diseases of the body. Both ideologies contain useful elements. Whelan succeeds in creating a rich, realistic setting full of believable and complex characters. While the reader may grow tired of the ever-cycling controversy surrounding Maude, there is enough texture in the story to keep the reader interested and engaged.

Volume 29, no. 6 (July/August 2009)