Reviews for The Least of These: Mask of Matthew

Review from Dr. Kathy Ritter, PHD. California State University, Bakersfield, CA

10/25/2015

I finished reading your book and I want you to know how much I enjoyed it. You are quite the storyteller!! I can see all your work in researching the background information related to the plot, as well as your digging into the psychological aspects. BRAVO!!

Fondly,

Kathy

Critic's Report from BOOKLIFE PRIZE FOR FICTION 2016

Assessment:

The complex emotions in this story about a convicted child abuser ring true and capture the rippling effects of child abuse, all the while taking on a familiar topic from a new point of view. The voice and premise of the novel are established in the first few pages, engaging the reader with the protagonist, Rachael, as she recounts a dream that sets the pace. Adds terrific foreshadowing, and creates the tension needed to move the reader to the end. Character development is excellent and lends to a complex plot. Excellent dialogue defines the different character voices.

Score: Plot/Idea -9, Originality-10, Prose-9, Character/Execution-10, Overall-9.50

The Least of These: Mask of Matthew finished as a Quarter Finalist of the 750 entries in this year's PRIZE IN FICTION

Report Submitted: August 2, 2016

Judge, 25th Annual Writer's Digest Self-Published Book Awards

Excellent opener with the Aristotle quote that engages the reader and sets the dark tone for the story to come. Author wisely follows that with Rachael's anxiety at the doctor's office, giving us an excellent sense of Rachael's layered character. We get a bit of her history and family story, making her all the more real to us. There are a number of pockets that could have used more dialogue, such as when Matthew called from jail, and in the pre-trial portions. When dialogue is missing, we lose a bit of our immersion into the story, since the author is telling what happened rather than generating extra detail and extra hook into the characters. Settings are beautifully crafted, adding to the realism of the story. Author has done a lot of research into the psychology of pedophiles and delivers such research in well-paced measure. We're learning as Rachael learns, and we get stomach-turning effect from the information, leading us to feel what Rachael must be feeling all the more, given her relationship with the offender. On page 144, we'd like more detail on which "manifestations" could be shown by Matthew, again sort of empty hole where so much detail would live. Author handles flashbacks to happier times very naturally, again boosting realism. Pace is stellar, and author writes wit a world-weariness in tone, a bit of disorientation, and a slew of emotions throughout. Well done.

SCORING – 1 to 5 with 5 being outstanding.

Structure, Organization, and Pacing: 5

Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar: 4

Production Quality and Cover Design: 5

Plot and Story Appeal: 5

Character Appeal and Development:5

Voice and Writing Style: 5

Author explores impact child abuse has on an entire family

BY CAMILLE GAVIN
For The Californian

In her first book, "Learning to Like Yellow," an appealing and sympathetic biography about her mother, Karen Wass merely hinted at child sexual abuse. In her new book, a novel titled "The Least of These," the author tackles the subject head on.

Subtitled "Mask of Matthew," it's a fictional story about a young married man who is sentenced to 10 years in prison for the crime of viewing and sending photos of child pornography on the Internet.

Although the setting is an unnamed town in the San Joaquin Valley, some readers will notice the similarities to Bakersfield. For example, the author says the federal court where Matthew is arraigned is 100 miles away in Fresno. And he serves his time in a prison in Taft.

Yet the story as a whole does not focus on the pedophile — Matthew is the son of a wealthy farmer called Big Jim, who's accustomed to using his money to get his kids out of trouble with the law.

Instead it is built around the effects the revelation of his addiction has on his wife, Rachel, and the couple's five-year marriage, which started out like a fairy tale — in her mind — and began to crumble after the birth of their first child, a girl called Reagan. Matt's disappointment that she's not a boy is evident, at least in private, and he begins to spend more time to himself, holing up with his computer in his home office.

"Because Matt had learned the art of deception well…few people would ever have guessed that all was not well in the 'perfect message' of Rachel and Matt," says the author referring to the invisible "mask" he wears, a deception common to most pedophiles.

Physical revulsion is Rachel's first reaction when she learns of Matt's admission of guilt and she files for divorce the next day. Soon she begins to realize the extent of damage he has done, not just to her but to their children, ages 3 and 5, as well as both sets of grandparents. Rachel's parents are supportive; Matt's parents are in denial, saying that a 30-day stay in a pricey rehab in Los Angeles will cure him.

During the interim between Matt's trial and his sentencing, Rachel attempts to resume an everyday life filled with lunches with friends, shopping and spending time at the beach. A recurring dream, however, signifies what her subconscious is feeling and she decides to seek professional help for her increasing anxiety. After only a few sessions with a therapist, however, she decides that participating in a women's group at her church is a better course. Still, she dreads the day when she will have to tell her children the truth about their father.

An additional conflict in the story involves a character called April Le, a Vietnamese-American law enforcement officer who works for a Department of Homeland Security task force dealing with sexual abuse and international human trafficking. April is a part of the team that executes a search warrant, seizing Matt's two computers.

At first Rachel treats April with hostility but ultimately the two women become friends. April, too, has a recurring dream in which she sees young Vietnamese girls in a tunnel, unable to escape from sexual predators.

Although there is no traditional happy ending to this tale, one does feel that both women have learned to trust and that they look into the future with hope, not despair.

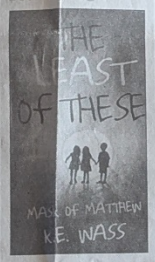
Overall, "The Least of These" holds the reader's attention — Wass is a good storyteller. Even so the novel suffers from long passages larded with facts and statistics as if in a textbook. That style is also evident in frequent and lengthy chunks of stilted dialogue. She would do well to adhere to a basic rule of creative writing: Show instead of telling.

Wass, 72, has a master's degree in counseling from Cal State Bakersfield. She practiced at Haven House (now Haven Counselling Center) for a few years after her graduation and also taught high school and later became successful in the business world.

"I still do lots of research in psychology and certainly used my education in real estate as I built my company in 1997," said the author in a recent conversation.

The book is priced at $13.99 for soft cover, $30.95 hard cover and $3.99 as an eBook. It is available at Barnes & Noble and Wass will have a book signing at the store on Tuesday.

Book signing



What: Author K.E. Wass will sign copies of her new book, "The Least of These: Mask of Matthew"

When: 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 6

Where: Barnes & Noble, 4001 California Ave.

Information: 631-2575

Review for Learning to Like Yellow: Lessons from My Mother

A warming memoir of a family's love, struggle

BY CAMILLE GAVIN
Contributing columnist

Overall, Karen Wass' memoir of her mother is a readable, heartwarming profile of a remarkable woman.

Even though it's clear that the Kern County author has a deep and abiding love for the woman who brought her and six other children into the world — the last one at age 50, a birth that interrupted her return to college to get her teaching credential — it's not all sunshine and roses. Far from it.

Wass does not gloss over the hard times of poverty, hunger and near-homelessness that occurred countless times during her childhood in the post-war years of the 1940s.

"Learning to Like Yellow" is as much a story of Wass' early life as it is her mother's relentless strength and courage.

The author employs an interesting structure for the book. It is told in alternating viewpoints and though the story is true, she substitutes different names for herself and others in the family.

"I don't know why," she said in a recent phone conversation. "I just couldn't use the (real) names."

The author calls herself Beth in the book and her mom becomes Lolo. An undercurrent of the story is a painful, unspoken secret each share, one that ultimately becomes their strongest bond.

It begins in 1994 in Bakersfield with Beth's reaction to news of Lolo's imminent death, then quickly reverts to 1938 and Lolo's marriage to Jay, Beth's father, in Kansas.

BOOK SIGNING

Who: Karen (K.E.) Wass, author of "Learning to Like Yellow: Lessons from My Mother"
When: 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday
Where: Barnes & Noble, 4001 California Ave
Admission: Free
Information: 631-2575

Wass is aided by letters the couple exchanged during their courtship. At the time, Lolo was a second-year college student and Jay was working on his family's farm. In a letter dated May 11, 1938, Lolo reveals her lighthearted nature and her hopes for the future. "Yes, honey, I wish I had a thousand dollars. We'd tear out for California and have a swell time going. I could ask my uncle there for a job, and we could leave this part of the country for good."

Unfortunately, it would be nearly 15 years until the couple and their growing brood would reach the Golden State. In between, things went from bad to worse.

In the 1940s, the family moved more times than Wass can remember when Jay quit farming — partly due to problems with Jay's extended family and partly because of Lolo's asthma — and began taking jobs in construction. First they moved to Colorado, then back to Kansas, and then back again to Colorado.

"As my mother used to say, we really did move from pillar to post," said Wass, a retired teacher and former real estate broker who now lives with her husband on a small acreage south of Lamont.

Undoubtedly, her home today is far different than the farm her family lived on as sharecroppers in 1948 when she was 5 years old.

"Some nights, I lay in bed thinking what it would be like to have extra food or shoes that didn't hurt my feet or toys from the store instead of sticks and junk from the yard. I was old enough to understand how hard my parents worked, that they were trying to make things better, but nothing seemed to change. Sweat, dirt and prayers for a good crop were the realities of our lives."

At one point the family lived in a series of barely habitable houses in the Denver area.

"Usually the search for a new place began at the end of a school term or at the end of Mom's patience, whichever came first," says the author.

Their fifth move in seven years was a mountain cabin infested with pack rats and other creatures that turned out to be a magical place for Beth and her siblings.

"The mountain became as familiar to us as a neighborhood is to city kids," she writes. "We had hiding places, paths through meadows, and streams from which to drink. Some days we stayed out for hours, returning only when the sun dropped down into the trees."

"Lessons from My Mother" is the book's subtitle and like the color yellow in the main title, it is a theme that weaves the chapters together and serves as a symbol of the many ways Lolo always managed to rise above any crisis.

"My mother did not let us complain; she always said 'grab the positive,'" Wass says now. "And I learned from that — I am a very optimistic person."

"Learning to Like Yellow" is available for a brief time at Barnes & Noble, or it can be ordered from amazon.com.