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REVIEWS

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THE CONEY ISLAND BOOK OF THE DEAD

An Illustrated Novel

Sheila Martin

Narrioch Books

BOOK REVIEW

Martin's debut novel matches a tale of magic, death, and childhood in 1957 Coney Island with 40 color illustrations.

Young Sarah's turbulent Jewish family in Brooklyn's Coney Island is intimately involved with the neighborhood's various institutions. Her mother was once Miss Coney Island, her father maintains amusement park rides, and her ex-gangster uncle owns an unsavory boardwalk saloon. Sarah becomes convinced that suave Lenny, a performer at the saloon, and mysterious "Mississippi," a drifter blues musician, are putting hidden "warnings" in their songs. Already reeling from the death of her grandmother, Sarah (who soon renames herself "Brooklyn") tries to wheedle an explanation from the musicians. She eventually learns that the approaching threat may be Molech ha-Movess, the Angel of Death. Meanwhile, she also tries to get to know her family's oddball tenant (an elderly hoarder) and help her cousin evade her unhinged "Evil Aunt Suzie." The novel extensively references both Jewish folklore and blues music. Martin, a Coney Island native herself, evocatively describes a childhood spent freely roaming boardwalks, seedy clubs, and amusement parks. One of the book's strongest elements is its depiction of Sarah's family members. Although it portrays questionable or even abusive parenting, it also hints that the imperfect adults in Sarah's life face multiple pressures; for example, her father barely sees his family during the busy season, and her mother suffers from depression and anorexia. (These pressures may even be supernatural—"Evil" Aunt Suzie, for instance, may be possessed by a *dybbuk*, a lost and angry soul.) The meandering plot structure generally serves the subject matter well, allowing Sarah to investigate different corners of her world. However, the novel struggles to maintain a sense of forward motion, as the central Angel-of-Death plotline gets lost among numerous others. The character of Mississippi could also have been developed further, as he struggles to transcend the wise, friendly, African-American blues musician stereotype. The book's illustrations, though, are wonderfully colorful, evocative, and slightly creepy, and they go well with Martin's playful, gothic text.

A flawed but often enjoyable magical-realist novel of Brooklyn.

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