

booklife

by Publishers Weekly

🔥 Spilman's multigenerational tale of four women in a rural West Virginia family ("stuck in the middle of no place with nothing") is rich with secrets and sorrows. In four sections, each woman narrates her own story. Lorraine is an embittered wife and mother who has never forgiven her mother, Carmen, for abandoning her when she was a child. Decades after that traumatic event, Carmen writes a letter to Lorraine explaining why she left and never came back. Lorraine's adolescent daughter, Jenna, struggles to deal with the letter's fallout. The fourth voice belongs to matriarch Lizzie, Carmen's mother, whose choices cast long shadows over her descendants. Each narrative is a page-turner, and Lizzie's astonishes from beginning to end.

Spilman (*Sansabblatt Head*), winner of a PEN Award and author of four young adult novels, shows full command of her characters and ability to spin a yarn. Fans of Southern fiction and women's fiction will gobble this one up, but some hunger may remain because Carmen's letter and Jenna's actions all pave the way to a momentous event that never happens. The author uses dark humor to effectively draw out the next step, but without the expected payoff. There are other small niggles: for instance, Lizzie's story has a shocking final twist, but a revelation that's intended to be dramatic falls victim to excessive foreshadowing. Nonetheless, there's plenty here to enthrall the reader.

The novel as a whole describes rural life in 20th-century West Virginia in an almost gothic manner. The horrors are not ghosts or spirits but poverty, alcohol, neglect, religious excess, and men's casual mistreatment of women. Hallmark themes of Appalachian fiction play out in a riveting fashion, illustrating moral ambiguity and the shades of gray found in human nature. Vivid descriptions and emotional intelligence create a lasting impression.

Takeaway: This powerful work of Southern women's fiction brings to life the struggles of four generations of women in a 20th-century West Virginia family.

Great for fans of Fannie Flagg, Pat Conroy, Sue Monk Kidd.