

Just Like That
Barbara Henning
Spuyten Duyvil. 2018
283 pp.

Set in New York City, Barbara Henning's latest novel *Just Like That*, tells a love story, but even more, it explores relationships, cultural differences and expectations. As protagonist Sara gets to know her new acupuncturist Jabari, she thinks, "I was white and he was Black and behind those words were centuries of problems" (12). The handsome doctor has an allure about him, both attractive and puzzling, which develops throughout the pages as Sara's emotions are laid bare. Henning's succinct style tells her story matter-of-factly like a journal and includes the most private of thoughts and details. Inexplicable at times, Jabari's silences and moodiness keep the reader wondering.

Sara's character unfolds via childhood memories, grief for her mother, and her years as a young mother. Henning conveys emotions and personality traits by weaving Sara's dreams throughout the story. Writer as character shows clearly in passages like "...holding these children and listening to them emerge into language....." (36) and "...making words and sounds in the quiet of my mind...." (71).

Within or because of the cross-cultural liaison, the responses of family and friends affects the relationship, and Henning thoughtfully illustrates the effects others have on the pair. Somewhat alternative from the mainstream, lifestyles of the main characters add appeal: yogi, vegan, poet. With detailed description, place becomes character as it influences the relationship. Characters come alive in their tiny apartments and in the parks, on the streets and subways of New York. As Sara and Jabari relate to each other, the reader glimpses inside each and develops his/her own strong opinions.

Although Henning's clean, neat style feels terse, passages of beauty, description, even mysticism soften the narrative. The protagonist seeks and therefore finds beauty in simplicity that helps her maintain her equilibrium and gives her insight. Sara and Jabari's bond, though unique in ways,

can be typical of most couples at times, yet the incidents and phases of their lives together will provoke strong responses from the reader.

Sara sets a good example. With thoughts of loving-kindness, not blaming others, lessons of staying steady, Sara attempts to balance her world. Easy to read, difficult to put down, so much happening in this unpredictable relationship.

April 15, 2018

NB. The West Florida Literary Federation was one of many nonprofits receiving grants in 2016 for arts and cultural projects and programs for the annual Foo Foo Festival. At the request of Jamey Jones, the Poet Laureate of Northwest Florida, we invited Barbara Henning and Lewis Warsh. Of course, I read some of their works before they arrived, and I felt an immediate affinity for Barbara Henning even before I met her. I enjoyed her voice in *A Day Like Today*, and her novel *You, Me and the Insects* drew me into her study of yoga in India.

So meeting Barbara was the satisfying culmination of events. The program included afternoon poetry-writing workshops, evening readings, and we ended with a brunch and interview on Sunday morning. But my favorite time was the intimate lunch at a local café having Barbara almost to myself when she signed her books for me.