

Blue Fifth Review: Blue Five Notebook Series

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A Review by Linda Simoni-Wastila

Susan Tepper, *The Merrill Diaries*

Pure Slush Books, 2013

“Spies have paid us a surprise visit. This couple who lived upstairs from us, when we lived at Fairlevel Gardens, is sitting on our couch, on the other side of the wall from where I’m still in bed. Our bedroom being right off the living room, no hallway, no pause here a moment before entering type of open area. Just the living room and plunk—the bed staring you in the face...”

In polite society, one does not read another’s diary, but with this opening, how could you resist? So begins *The Merrill Diaries*, the latest novel by Susan Tepper. Known for her smart language and quirky characters, Tepper does not disappoint here. In this opening, we learn much about Merrill: her impatience at unwanted visitors, her frustration with a too-public bedroom, her paranoia—or is it merely distrust?—of her old neighbors, who she believes are spies. What follows is hilarious, as her growing need to pee conflicts with her desire to avoid the visitors.

The rest of the novel follows in similar fashion. We follow Merrill through her twenties as she puddle-jumps from marriage to marriage and country to country. A sort of retro *Eat, Pray, Love* (sans the saccharine self-indulgence), *The Merrill Diaries* opens in New Jersey with Merrill making house with Teddy, a Vietnam vet whose flat feet and color-blindness kept him out of helicopter action. She ditches Teddy for Eddy, a sexy guitar player in the band she sings with in Atlantic City bars, and then moves on to Tom, in London. A gig in Greece with Theo, a cruise tour operator, follows, then a return to the States to her sister Nan and another series of mishaps, before she ends up back in London.

In Merrill we have a protagonist full of complexity and contradictions: a sexual soul with a prudish heart, a woman who chafes under commitment to people or place, a woman who trips over herself as she tries to find her place in the world. Yet she knows her limitations and breezes through them, always hurtling forward and never wallowing in the detritus left in her wake. Sure, Merrill carries baggage, most notably her mother, a woman who stole other people's histories and thus, in a way, stole their lives. It's to her mother that Merrill owes her resiliency, as well as her appreciation of the finer things in life. But at the same time, Merrill contradicts herself by fighting off the messages her mother plants in her mind as she tramps through her twenties.

A key to crafting a compelling story is insuring the protagonist wants something she cannot have. But what does Merrill want? The reader struggles with this question as Merrill jumps from one man's bed to another, and boards ferries and planes to yet another exotic locale. As you read, it's not clear Merrill knows what she wants, yet even with not knowing, the reader remains engaged. Indeed, this not knowing becomes Merrill's holy grail: What do I want?

This is a fast-paced read, in large part due to the exquisite yet no-nonsense writing. One of Tepper's hallmarks is spare, taut prose, and she doesn't disappoint here. Merrill's emotional voice runs the gamut from impatient to hilarious to naïve to heart-wrenching sad. Another Tepper hallmark is her expository style of fiction, which lends itself to flash-fiction vignettes strung together like a glistening strand of pearls. Thirty chapters (if you count the prologue, divided into three sections, most chapters three to four pages in length. Yet in each diary entry we gain total access to Merrill, a deep immersion into her life, her loves, her lusts, her disappointments.

Tepper is the author of several books, most recently *From the Umberplatzen* (Wilderness House Press) and *What May Have Been: Love Letters of Jackson Pollack and Dori G* (Cervena Barva press), which she co-wrote with Gary Percesepe. Both of these share similarities with *The Merrill Diaries* in their use of expository methods and in their use of pithy chapters, a characteristic especially of *From the Umberplatzen*. Most of all, the three books explore love in all of its glory—and its messiness—a topic Tepper handles with deft surety.

When the ending came, I wanted more. I wanted more from the places Merrill landed, a bit more lingering on the exteriors through her eyes. Tepper handles the different stations of Merrill's quest deftly, using few but telling details. For instance, I will forever think of Athens as the city where drivers tool around after dark using only parking lights. It's a creepy detail, yet one that sticks and makes that particular way station memorable. As well, at times the time period, the 70s—an iconic time period in the US and the world—feels brushed over. Then again, we are living the times as Merrill lives them, in present tense, and there is little time for retrospection. Indeed, Merrill is a very forward-thinking, impatient-with-the-moment person, so this rush toward her next moment rings true to her character.

Merrill endeared me to her, a feisty woman who perseveres through hard knocks and fortune not with grace as much as humor. And who can't learn from that? *The Merrill Diaries* is lighthearted and deep, funny and sad—a reflection of Merrill herself.

Linda Simoni-Wastila writes from Baltimore, where she also professes, mothers, and gives a damn. You can find her stuff at *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Monkeybicycle*, *The Sun*, *The Poet's Market 2013*, *Hoot*, *Connotation Press*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Every Day Poetry*, and *Nanoism*, among others. Senior Fiction Editor at *JMWW*, she slogs one word at a time towards her MA in Creative Writing at Johns Hopkins and her current novel-in-progress. In between sentences, she blogs at <http://linda-leftbrainwrite.blogspot>.