

Elly Robin: Bird in a Gilded Cage: Volume Five of the Ordeals of Elly Robin

P. D. Quaver

Amazon KDP (Jun 24, 2021)

Softcover (464pp)

979-852634621-4

Focused on labor struggles and class differences, the alluring historical novel Elly Robin: Bird in a Gilded Cage positions its scrappy heroine for further adventures.

In P. D. Quaver's invigorating historical novel *Elly Robin: Bird in a Gilded Cage*, a teenage piano prodigy plays witness to historical turns, including labor struggles, anarchism, and the buildup to World War I.

Elly once played ragtime in a New Orleans brothel. Now, she seeks the tutelage of Bellini, a maestro in Chicago. Impressed by her talent, Bellini allows her into his home. But Elly's manners are almost feral, and she can't master the art of small talk. Because Elly needs deportment lessons to succeed in music, she's taken under the LaSalle family's patronage. Here, Elly faces the scorn of Willy, one of the LaSalle daughters.

Humor brews in the contrast between Elly's rustic habits and her wealthy surroundings. She's eccentric (she drives her own steam car and wields a stiletto dagger); she's a picky eater; and she's taciturn and perceptive, developing rapport with the household staff. Her worldly, perilous past is alluded to, though this series installment is more jaunty and focused on her social adaptations. Glimpses of how others perceive her hint at her loneliness, despite her brave front. And in addition to facing class differences, Elly contends with a possible ghost.

Elly's unconventional education is used to explore the period's history. When Elly learns that the LaSalle empire was built on the work of immigrant factory girls, she's ignited to fight for justice on their behalf. Such discoveries are gradual, though they do advance the plot as they arise. Elly absorbs the stories of the garment factory workers and ventures into Chicago's neighborhoods and parlors with a plucky spirit. She has brushes with famous people, including Emma Goldman and Carl Sandburg. She also reunites with old friends and experiences the beginning of a romance.

Still, the book's subplots are quite slow to develop. They're returned to after lengthy intervals, giving the book an episodic, patchwork flavor. This is particularly true when it comes to tracing the LaSalle family's secrets, wherein Willy's awakening to the realities behind her family's fortune is delayed. The book is most focused when it comes to its heroine's particular skills; passages regarding musical compositions and techniques are used to anchor its sense of Elly's impressive talent, which spans classical and popular music. She's a quick study and passionate about her craft, if also sometimes impish, and the idea that she's headed toward greatness is well supported.

Positioning its scrappy heroine for further adventures, the alluring historical novel *Elly Robin: Bird in a Gilded Cage* focuses on an eccentric young musician who's curious about the world around her.

KAREN RIGBY (February 14, 2024)

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