

Surviving Southwood Avenue: A Story of Family Secrets and Resilience

Melissa Simonye

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Fleshing out a family story with imagination and admiration for its heroine, Surviving Southwood Avenue is an inspiring historical novel.

In Melissa Simonye's historical novel *Surviving Southwood Avenue*, a girl's Depression-era coming-of-age shapes the rest of her life.

Stella's mother, Clara, leaves her family when Stella is four, just as her own mother left her. Stella and her three older siblings are put in the care of a boardinghouse matriarch while their father works. After years of mistreatment, including sexual abuse, they move back in with their father in improved conditions.

Starting with Stella watching Clara depart, the story builds on a comparison of the two women and their environments, its parts devoted to each of them. Clara escapes her family life; she wanted to work more, but her husband wanted her to prioritize raising their children. Stella, meanwhile, maintains her family, bettering her ties with her siblings even though some of them bully her. Her story is understood in contrast to Clara's; she benefits from the consequences of her mother's mistakes in the end. The endurance and the independence she learns through her trials work for her; Clara's escape, in contrast, does not end well.

Indeed, this is a story about persistence and grit; its pace is determined and focused on highlighting growth. Stella builds a friendship that turns into a romance, despite her resistance to intimacy. She also looks out for abuse in most situations. The bonds she establishes with her found family are a matter of survival and fortitude. Instead of voicing her trauma and finding catharsis in sharing pain, she maintains strict secrecy.

Stella is a lionized heroine whose childhood curiosity is emphasized. Throughout the book, she often asks why, on subjects ranging from her mother's abandonment to her siblings' disregard and the boardinghouse abuses. Explanations for these pains are not verbalized, however; instead, Stella's steeliness, even sans answers for what she's endured, is made focal. She becomes a picture of strength and grace, feeding unhoused people during the Great Depression and working with the American Red Cross to help others. The most disturbing particulars of what she endures are evaded; instead, there are raw details about hunger, vomit, illness, and wetting herself in fear. Here and elsewhere, emotions are expressed in terms of their physical manifestations.

Beyond Stella's experiences, shattering world events are glossed over. So too are details about her Ohio hometown. Stella's dissociative escapes from abuse are better fleshed out: Angels talk to her in pockets of fantasy. The setting beyond these experiences is merely stifling. Some elements are taken to jarring extremes, as when the boardinghouse matriarch and her son are described as being demonic. The cathartic ending gives Stella the opportunity to express her enduring anger at last; it's an inspiring if idealized moment.

In the historical novel *Surviving Southwood Avenue*, a plucky survivor finds happiness after a childhood of trauma.

MARI CARLSON (September 23, 2024)

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