

The Phoenix

Eric Van Allen

Terra Verde Publishing

(392pp)

979-821859193-9

A distrustful teenager acclimates to a new life—and to supernatural realities—in the surprising novel The Phoenix.

In Eric Van Allen's supernatural novel *The Phoenix*, a teenager and her siblings navigate an unstable home life.

Sixteen-year-old Callie lives in a small, worn-down apartment with her younger brother and sister. After an eviction notice and with their mother nowhere to be found, the siblings move in with Mr. Delamorte, the director of a funeral home. Callie and her siblings adjust to life at the funeral home and to having a parental figure checking in on them. Callie nurses suspicions about their new living arrangement and struggles to trust Delamorte.

Callie narrates. Her voice is conversational and accessible, though her toughness leads to limited descriptions—her preferred quantifier is “butt-ton,” for example. Other characters supplement her descriptions in conversation, helping to flesh out her world somewhat. Her brainiac brother provides facts that are integral to the plot, for example, while her sweet sister adds emotion to their conversations. Delamorte's voice, meanwhile, is mature and elevated.

The characters balance each other out well, though they are static in their specific roles. Callie's siblings are quick to trust Delamorte, and that trust does not falter even after a surprising revelation, leaving them little room to develop. Delamorte is a stable figure who is a good foil for Callie's mother.

The story is slow to start. Care is taken to establish Callie's daily routines as she looks after her siblings and avoids social services. Once the siblings move in with Delamorte, new daily routines consume most of the attention. Supernatural elements are hinted at; however, these remain in the background until the book's climax. In part, this is because Callie's own belief in the supernatural fluctuates, even when she's confronted with evidence of it. Lucy, the funeral home's beautician, appears without making a sound, and the patterns on her dress look like they're moving, for example, but Callie explains away these details, even after Lucy reveals her true nature. Her lack of belief seems to stem from her inability to trust others, but there is no change to her thought processes as she grows closer to Delamorte and learns more about Lucy. She repeats the same questions to herself, and her growth is stunted. Though she ends up with a different outlook at the end of the story, it is unclear how she got there with so little variation in her approaches to the unknown.

Indeed, the book's climactic portions are too rushed through to be satisfying. The obstacles Callie faces are hurdled with speed and too much ease, as well. When Callie has a run-in with the police as she's trying to complete her mission, for example, she is regarded as a suspect for reported gunshots, but she is then dismissed from consideration with little explanation.

In the searching novel *The Phoenix*, a girl grieves her lost parents and seeks security in a newfound family.

JULIA DILLMAN (February 18, 2025)

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