

Annie is obese, lonely and hopeful. Armed with self-help books, her cat and a collection of cow-shaped milk jugs, she moves into her new home and sets about getting to know the neighbors, especially the man next door. She ignores her neighbor's inconvenient girlfriend, but it's not quite as easy for Annie to dismiss her own past. As Annie's murky history of violence, secrets and sexual mishaps catches up with her, she cannot see that she has done anything wrong. She's just doing what any good neighbor would do, after all...

In her debut novel, Ashworth takes on a formidable task: an insane yet sympathetic protagonist whose efforts at self-help spell disaster. Annie Fairhurst is a socially inept and obese Briton who has murdered her husband and child—which is alluded to but not confirmed until later in the story. She moves into a duplex occupied by an unmarried couple, Neil and Lucy, and Annie immediately becomes obsessed with Neil, who unfortunately makes the mistake of being friendly. In Annie's warped mind, Neil is sending her secret signals of love, although no rational human being would agree from the evidence presented. Annie clashes with Lucy from the start and as their relationship devolves, Annie's strange and aggressive behavior—putting trash through Neil and Lucy's mail slot, stealing Lucy's dress, listening to Lucy and Neil's conversations through the shared wall of their duplex—escalates from childish to, finally, criminal, in a shocking series of actions. Interspersed throughout are glimpses of Annie's past, her troubled marriage and stilted feelings toward her infant daughter, Grace. The beautiful, provocative prose and dangerous, quirky protagonist mark Ashworth as a writer to watch.

Annie Fairhurst, the narrator of this clever, black-humored character study, hooks the reader from the opening scene, which opens with Annie sending a van containing all her possessions to a new address, after which she strips off all her clothes and viciously attacks the "bloody sofa" which she has left behind. It is the sofa on which her husband proposed to her more than a decade ago. When she arrives at her new house, she envisions herself as Jackie Kennedy, "getting out of an airplane. She's tiptoeing down the steps, her hair like sculpted soap, waving gently..." Clearly this main character, who has problems with anger and with her perception of herself, has a lot to learn, but the reader quickly discovers that she plans to work on her issues—with advice from virtually every self-help book ever written.

Author Jenn Ashworth takes the concept of irony to new heights in this psychological novel which rivals Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* in its intensity, and it is in her irony that this novel achieves something that McCabe's novel does not—it is pathetically funny at the same time that it is terrifyingly slow in its revelations of Annie's past life. In the first six pages, Neil, Annie's new next door neighbor, asks her if "the family," especially her little girl, have arrived yet. Annie asserts that he must be confused. Every remark and every action from this point on capitalizes on the reader's understanding of real life as the author shows it being played out in conversations among the neighbors and other residents of the community, while Annie twists and manipulates what she sees and hears so that her reality will be what she wants it to be. Her obsession with the unfortunate Neil,

who is happily living with Lucy, a young woman whom Annie abhors, leads her into many unneighborly acts, and she eventually comes to the attention of the association's Neighborhood Watch.

All the conversations between Annie and everyone else are classics of dramatic irony. The reader recognizes bits of the truth while the real story of Annie and her past are withheld for most of the book, thereby sustaining suspense while drawing the reader into Annie's twisted world. The cumulative picture of Annie's mind as the plot develops further becomes positively terrifying--and pathetic. When the author finally begins to reveal details of Annie's past, the reader still cannot help wondering how the author will ever reconcile the information gleaned from several seemingly conflicting scenes. The conclusion is sly-brilliant, even-with the full impact coming very gradually.

Ashworth's eye for the character-revealing detail is unerring, as is her control of Annie's "voice." A couple of obvious examples of foreshadowing are a bit clumsy, but overall, the author's control of her details and her pacing are meticulous. Ashworth manages to depict a main character with a perverted sense of self and gross ignorance of the social conventions, at the same time satirizing the very suburban society which Annie wishes to be part of--a major achievement pulled off with panache and darkly humorous flair.

This story is narrated by Annie Fairhurst, a 28 year old morbidly obese woman who at one time was married and had a daughter. At the start of this story, Annie is moving out of her old house and about to start her life anew in a different neighborhood. She clearly has bad thoughts and memories of the old home and seems to relish the chance to start a new life somewhere else.

In her new place she meets her helpful and kind next-door neighbor Neil and develops a crush on him. She also becomes jealous of his live-in girlfriend Lucy. Annie tries to get to know her neighbors and becomes friends of sorts with the head of the local Neighborhood Watch program - an Indian woman named Sangita.

We learn soon enough in this novel that Annie is not a very reliable narrative not because of intentional lies but because she is sociopathic, and possibly psychopathic. She constantly reads self-help books in an attempt to gain confidence about herself and to learn how she should behave to be accepted and thrive in normal society.

As the story continues, Annie's series of deceptions and self-delusions start to unravel, and we learn all about her past and what happened to her husband and child. We also learn about her own upbringing. By the end of the novel we know it all.

This is an interesting story and recommended for those who like psychological thrillers. In many ways this novel reminded me of those by Ruth Rendell, one of my favorite mystery authors.

At the same time, in critique, some of the writing was a bit too heavy-handed and manipulative. Because Annie is narrating the whole story from her POV. That can be very tricky when writing

about an unreliable narrator, because their unreliability has to flow organically - you can't have the narrator tell us things she shouldn't have been aware of. As examples, and this happened over and over again in this story, Annie would be thinking one thing but then describe other characters as "immensely relieved" (when they left her) , or "knowingly look at each other" when she's around. That lets us, the readers know what's really happening and what those characters are thinking, but it shouldn't be coming to us from Annie. Or at least I shouldn't notice it as much as I did.

Also, I felt that Annie's obesity wasn't just used to show us how alienated Annie was from people, and how society looks at the morbidly obese - but it almost became a reason for the reader to be disgusted with her. I've never had weight issues so this is not a personal issue for me, but I started feeling uncomfortable at one point reading about this. This could just be my own reaction to this so it may not bother anyone else.