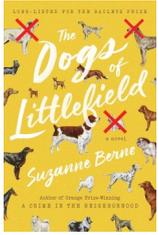


The Dogs of Littlefield



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Something is happening to the dogs of Littlefield, Mass. Is someone poisoning them or does the blame fall on something more supernatural? A cast of delightful, small-town characters suffers through this travesty as circumstance and personality pit one against each other.

It begins with the posting of warnings: pet-owners should not let their dogs roam free in the park. The signs start off politely, then denigrate into meaner advice: "Leash your beast or else." Then a white bull-mastiff is found poisoned in the park woods. Soon the aldermen schedule a meeting to discuss two diametrically-opposed proposals: ban all dogs from the park, or create a leash-free area for the dogs to play and have freedom.

Littlefield, long on the top ten list of best small communities to live in America, appears to be coming apart in myriad ways. Most of the teens and adults have therapists. The veneer of social niceness quickly disappears.

Margaret, the main character, a housewife and former music teacher, is having trouble relating to both her middle-school daughter, Julia, and her husband, Bill, whose business is being investigated by the Feds. Other middle-schoolers bully her at school, and Julia treats her mother with contempt, or ignores her. Meanwhile Bill develops allergies from sleeping with Margaret, or so he thinks but doesn't dare say. They visit a marriage counselor each Thursday.

George, the owner of the poisoned mastiff, writes novels and raises two teenage sons. His wife has left him, moving back with her mother, Mrs. Beale, who was the first one to post anti-dog signs. The park borders her property and she has a proprietary interest in protecting it.

But alas I am making the novel sound grim, when it is often riotously funny. At Christmas Bill invites a group to their house who do not celebrate the holiday. Margaret has always begged for such a gathering--instead of their annual visit to the noodle shop--but this year is in no mood to entertain.

It doesn't help that the author, George Wechsler, whom she met in the park, was also invited. Also, she initiated a passionate kiss with him in his car on the way to the aldermen's meeting and hasn't spoken to him since. And why, oh, why, did she prepare a big ham when most of the people coming are Jewish?

And did I mention that the tall elegant lady, Clarice, who lives next door to Bill and Margaret, is a visiting anthropology professor and constantly writes notes about the residents?

The aldermen's meeting seem through the eyes of an elderly woman was a hoot. Will she faint before or after she seizes the mike? And why are those other people saying such crazy things about dogs?

The author vividly brings characters to life. Here's the description of Mrs. Beale, "She had a handsome, predatory nose, and long, pale, flat, weathered cheeks; she looked something like a trout and also something like Margaret Thatcher?"

Berne writes a wonderful comedy of manners, and her descriptions of how we fail each other in major and minor ways are detailed and spot-on. Dog-lover or not, this book will strike your fancy. It's pawesome!

Posted by Dory L. on June 21, 2016

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