

Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk



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Solvitur Ambulande, solved by walking, could be the motto of this novel. And if you, like me, process the world while strolling through town or the woods, you'll love this book.

Two alternating stories thread through it. In one, it's the 1980s, and New York City still has a crime problem, so people fear walking at night. Most, that is, except for Lillian Boxfish, an octogenarian advertising maven (retired) and a poet. It's New Year's 1985, and a ten-mile, round trip walk from upper Manhattan to the Bowery and the Village is no big deal for her.

The second story first-time novelist Kathleen Rooney weaves tells Lillian's history in the Big Apple. After moving to New York from D.C. in the roaring twenties, Lillian immediately felt at home. She began living in Manhattan in a sheltered rooming house with strict curfews and rules against male visitors. Lillian and her childhood girlfriend got around these rules by organizing Shakespearean theater pieces to which they invited eligible bachelors. Later, they'd head out on the town with them, and coming back hours after curfew, they'd tip the front desk person, and steal back to their rooms. Lillian gave up theater for the exciting world of advertising. Her way with language, wellspring of ideas and ability to create humorous rhymes in the Dorothy Parker tradition soon had her climbing the advertising ladder, something few women had ever done.

She also began publishing books of poetry, etiquette, and self-help books. Society pages also covered this dynamic woman who vowed she would never marry and have children. But then one day in Macy's she met an Italian rug-buyer and fell hard. Soon they headed up the aisle and then share a shipboard vacation to Italy for their honeymoon.

Lillian insisted she would never have children, though soon she became the mother of a musical son. This novel seemed so authentic that I wasn't surprised to learn that it was inspired by a real advertising trailblazer and poet named Margaret Fishback. One of the author's friends, an academic librarian shared Lillian's story with Rooney after she cataloged the writer's papers for Duke University.

The author contacted the son, and received permission to use a couple of Margaret's real letters in the book.

But through all these years, Lillian never gave up ambulating through the big city. She also conversed with complete strangers. Some of the nicest scenes in the novel occur when a stranger asks Lillian a question, or vice versa, and they share an *ad hoc* retelling of their lives.

This book would make a great read before visiting the Big Apple. The pace, excitement and interesting mix of people would make a fantastic introduction to one of the world's most beloved cities.

Posted by Dory L. on March 1, 2017

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