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It's the middle of the twentieth century and Portland has fallen into the hands of gangsters. Newly orphaned Mae Rose is on the lam from a knife wielding pimp, mustering her own worst impulses to survive, while Dr. Ruth Barnett, queen of Portland's nightlife, runs a lucrative abortion service. After the war, both women are caught in the cross hairs of anti-vice crusader Dottie "Do-good" Lee. But Mayor Lee's DA-in-pursuit has his own dirty little reasons to track Mae down. *Girl in the River* is a portrait of the intimate lives of women during one of the most corrupt periods in Portland history. It's an unflinching look at the power dynamics of sex. A glimpse into the work life of a call girl. An improbable love story. The tale of post-war assaults on reproductive rights. And a tribute to two remarkable and remarkably different women who shaped the lives of Portlanders during those tumultuous times: Dr. Ruth Barnett and Mayor Dorothy Lee.

Girl in the River Details

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From Reader Review *Girl in the River* for online ebook

Jonathan says

What I like second best about this novel is that it dares greatly. What I like best about it is that it succeeds.

The majority of the action takes place in Portland, Oregon in the 1940's, where we are introduced to the surprisingly cozy relationship between law, morality and vice that evolved in the city as a war-time boom lifted it out of the great depression. Through the character of Mae Rose, a high-priced prostitute and the protagonist of the novel, the author shows us some of those truths that exist just beneath the skin of appearance – for example, that at the heart of many a powerful and respected man lives a naughty little boy who desperately wants his mommy.

In fact, much of the fun of the novel is seeing power relationships and societal expectations getting turned inside out. When Deputy D.A. Bill Warsham goes looking for a thrill and finds Mae Rose, what starts out as Warsham's fantasy turns into his most overwhelming and inescapable reality, when he realizes that he is, in so many ways, completely at Mae's mercy.

Mae, of course, is no less susceptible to the riptides of love than anyone else, and she gets pulled into an unusual love triangle the details of which I won't divulge here, except to say that, once again, notions about power and control, weakness and strength, get turned on their heads and are part and parcel of the complex set of relationships that drive this novel forward.

There is a lot in this novel about sin and consequences (and who cleans up the mess and who is and is not held accountable), but I don't want to give too much away, so I'll end by saying the novel is historical fiction, and as such, runs the risk of turning a story into a lecture – but the author deftly avoids that pitfall, unobtrusively providing the reader with the feel (and look and smell and sound) of the time.

A good story, well-told and well-paced.

Julienne says

One of the best opening lines that I've read in a long time:

“Even after a good stretch of untroubled time a girl might fret over which one of her mistakes was the worst ever. Until one day it struck her, when the biggest mistake barged back into her life.”

This novel is at once gritty, sexy, funny, shocking, compassionate and feminist. Think a mashup of Isabel Allende with noir writer like Megan Abbott or maybe Sara Paretsky (but without the murder).

The author writes lyrically and uses language of the period to great effect. It's a tour of the underbelly of mid-century Portland with a protagonist I couldn't help but love. Her relationship with the tenacious and charming Leonard was incredibly romantic in its honesty and vulnerability. The interplay of Mae's other lovers are no less compelling and complex. I won't reveal more so as to not spoil anything.

The story is poignant and in no way saccharine. It was indeed one of those books with that strange energy

that kept me reading and not wanting to say goodbye to the story by finishing it. Those books always end up on the shelf of those I long to read again. *Girl In A River* is on that shelf now and my friends will just have to buy their own copies.

Another favorite line:

"Out there, where the water turns white, the river will take you, all the way to the sea and I would miss you something terrible."

Smitha says

Mae Rose has been living with her mother. She had clues that everything wasn't quite normal in her family when she found herself not being allowed to be friends with other kids. As she grew up, she realised why, her mother was a prostitute. She wanted to be nothing like her mother, but orphaned at 16, life pushes her into her mother's world.

Set in the Portland of 1950s, a city controlled by criminals and crime, Mae Rose's life reflects the turbulent times that it was. 16 year old Mae Rose, newly orphaned, when her mother dies from a botched abortion, suddenly realises how unsafe the city can be for girls like her. All she wants is some work, but realises all too soon that young girls like her are preyed upon. She ends up learning the hard way, and then decides to play unsafe on her own terms.

The story brings underbelly of the city, funded by gangsters hand in hand with the corrupt city officials, it was the girls on the street who bore the brunt of it. The story features two real people from that era, Dr Ruth Barnett, the famous abortionist and Dorothy Lee, the anti-vice crusader who came down heavily on corruption. Mae Rose's story is woven beautifully with the happenings at that time.

It was a book that needs to be read. A book with so much insight into those times. A book I would definitely recommend. It also has the most charming and unlikeliest of romances, one I found very sweet, and yet doesn't detract from the tale being narrated at all, which is far from sweet. A 4.5/5 book for me. A book that will stay with me.

Susan Csoke says

Growing up Mae Rose lived in a boarding house with her mother Lily where a multitude of men came and went. When Lily died Mae went to live with a widower and his six children. The Rose home was in foreclosure. Unhappy Mae packed her bag and headed for Portland. She was 16 years old. Unable to find work she was homeless and at the mercy of others. Brutally real situations for all to comprehend. THANK YOU GOODREADS FIRSTREADS FOR THIS FREE BOOK!!!!

Kristi Richardson says

"Mae was used to being thanked. Many of her johns, especially her regulars, had been profuse, even pathetic, in their gratitude. A blessing was different. It made her want to work a hundred hours a day."

I received this book from the Goodreads giveaway program. I am sorry to say, I had some health issues and lost the book for a time. However, after relocating it I was anxious to continue reading this great story.

This is noir fiction at its darkest and best. Patricia Kullberg is a doctor who worked with women like the book's protagonist, Mae Rose. This story is fiction but as they say in the movies nowadays, based on real events. It is set in Portland, Oregon during the depression and WWII years, up to the early 1950's.

It is the story of a young girl whose mother dies from a botched abortion and Mae Rose is taken in by a family that abuse is only a step away. She runs away at 16 and makes her way to the streets of Portland. Soon she learns how to survive the only way she knows by being a prostitute. This story minces no words and does not sugar coat "the life".

Mae is a survivor. She does not want to be a prostitute, but sees no way out until she meets Dr. Ruth Barnett, the doctor who performs abortions in the most humane way possible. She impresses the doctor enough to take her on as an assistant and Mae has found her calling. Most days she just holds the patients hand and lets them tell her their problems. Most of those problems she knows only too well.

Portland, Oregon is one of the most corrupt towns in America at this time and when Dorothy Lee runs for Mayor as a reformer, most people are ready for a change. However, Mayor Lee is talked into going after the abortionists and encounters Dr. Barnett.

These are real people from Portland and the locations are real. We have Oaks Park, Yaw's Top Notch and Rocky Butte Jail all getting featured spots in the story. Living in Portland this made the novel even more realistic.

The characters were well drawn and very human. The story is gritty but ends in hope. This is a survivor's tale and it works.

Rachel says

I was rooting for Mae from the first page, and the story had me seduced by the second chapter. Mae's tale is one most women can relate to on some level; she does what she must to survive, but her choices often lead to unintended consequences. Her life unfolds in Portland, Oregon of an earlier era and Kullberg clearly did her research. She includes identifiable names and places in the city's history in a way that both offers insight into human nature and gives credence to Mae's story. Mae's ordeals, fortunately, are not the norm for most of us, but her search for her place of contentment in a world proven worthy of her distrust, and her overcoming of youthful wrong turns, remains timely. Kullberg's prose is perfect. I was drawn into the author's vivid narrative and I believed every word of compelling dialogue. *Girl in the River* isn't just a summer read; it's social history with a personal twist and is overall an evocative, first-rate contemporary novel. I am a pre-publication reader who highly recommends the book to anyone who wants a good read.

Sarah says

Girl in the River is a novel based on actual events prior to, during, and just after WWII in Portland, Oregon. The main character, Mae Rose, is 16 and finds herself alone on the streets. She is desperate for food and a roof over her head, and is hoodwinked by a pimp, thrown in jail for no reason other than being out on the streets late at night and meets a woman who offers her a job in prostitution that is part of the night life of Portland. Corruption among the police, politicians and one-up-man-ship among the two newspapers in Portland becomes the backdrop for a story of how women were treated by society whether they were prostitutes, business women or housewives. It is a story of the good-ole-boy networks and corrupt politicians that still exist today. Girl in the River also highlights Dr. Ruth Barnett, a real woman in history who tried to provide the safest abortions possible and is a record of the continual fight for reproductive freedom in America. It is reported that Dr. Barnett, a naturopath, performed 40,000 abortions with no maternal deaths (Wikipedia) which was unusual for the era.

The book is well written and keeps a steady pace. Like My Notorious Life, this historically based novel puts a human face on the struggles of women throughout history, and shows how easy it is to judge others. And while some have good intentions, their strong-arm attempts at justice are sometimes misdirected and lack empathy and compassion, create more hardship and pain, as well as being bereft of compassionate solutions.

itpdx says

The story of Mae Rose begins in an Oregon lumber town during the Depression. She is the daughter of a single mother who runs a boarding house. The mother dies from a botched abortion. This sets the frame for Mae's next 20 years as she ends up homeless in Portland, is forced into prostitution and then works for an abortionist as Portland changes.

I am a native Portlander, so this has the added pleasure of familiar places.

At the beginning I think the author was trying to write in the style of a 40's crime novel with lots of slangy descriptors. The tendency faded as the story progressed or I fell into mood of the book.

M. Louis says

Girl in the River by Patricia Kullberg is a well written book about Portland, Oregon from the late thirties into the fifties. A young Mae Rose's mom dies from a botched abortion at the end of the depression. Having no family to help her, she moves from rural Oregon to Portland. Bad luck and dire economic times force her to make hard choices to survive.

Well written, the book provides an interesting description of Portland and some of its residents, as Mae works to not only survive but thrive.

5 stars!

Ellen says

I received this book as a free copy from GR w/ a personal note from the author-thank you! I learned a lot about the era (post war Portland, Oregon)while reading this and the author got a lot right about dialogue, settings and costume. I had a bit of a disconnect when the descriptors (both adjective and adverb) felt a little forced.

Heather says

Really enjoyable read. Now I'm curious about what is historical fact and how much is fiction.

I hope young women will read this and learn not to take safe, legal abortion for granted.
