



Sisters Of Mercy

Caroline Overington

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Sisters of Mercy by Caroline Overington is the haunting story of two sisters - one has vanished, the other is behind bars...

Snow Delaney was born a generation and a world away from her sister, Agnes.

Until recently, neither even knew of the other's existence. They came together only for the reading of their father's will - when Snow discovered, to her horror, that she was not the sole beneficiary of his large estate.

Now Snow is in prison and Agnes is missing, disappeared in the eerie red dust that blanketed Sydney from dawn on September 23, 2009.

With no other family left, Snow turns to crime journalist Jack Fawcett, protesting her innocence in a series of defiant letters from prison. Has she been unfairly judged? Or will Jack's own research reveal a story even more shocking than the one Snow wants to tell?

With Sisters of Mercy Caroline Overington once again proves she is one of the most exciting new novelists of recent years.

Sisters Of Mercy Details

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From Reader Review Sisters Of Mercy for online ebook

Dale Harcombe says

Snow Delaney wants to set the record straight. Imprisoned for child abuse and neglect, Snow wants a chance to tell her side of the story, so she writes to Jack Fawcett a newspaper journalist offering her version of events. As a result much of the story is told through letters. Jack meanwhile, continues his research into her life and also that of Agnes. Agnes had always believed she was an orphan until her father died and the truth was revealed. She was excited to learn she had a sister in Australia. Agnes went missing after her visit to Australia to meet Snow. No-one knows what happened to her. Or do they?

The further it got into this book the more I ended up skipping or skimming passages because I simply could deal with the treatment meted out to the disabled children in care by Snow and her partner. I find it very hard to read about cruelty to others and in particular children. I felt quite sickened by it. I also found the ending unsatisfactory. This was a disappointing read for me. I should have just passed and picked up something else to read instead. Others have enjoyed this book, so this may be purely a personal reaction. I don't like reading about cold and twisted people.

Charley says

Loved this book from start till the last page.. SPOILER!

I cannot stand books where there is no definitive answer at the end and this is the only reason this is not getting 5 stars. Concluding a book and still having not a single clue what happened to one of the central characters is a little ridiculous. In Overingtons other books the conclusion is always hinted at but here it was just laid out what a crap person Snow was... but that doesn't mean she killed Agnes. I'm a little disappointed because I love Overington so much

Monique Mulligan says

Engrossing yet discomforting, Sisters of Mercy by Caroline Overington had me hooked from start to finish and offered a truly chilling character that rivals Annie Wilkes in Stephen King's Misery.

Presented as the haunting story of two sisters, one who goes missing and the other who is behind bars, you

could be forgiven for thinking it's a simple whodunit/mystery. The tagline on the cover suggests as much: How can one woman simply disappear? Through brilliant characterisation, it soon becomes clear that Sisters of Mercy is much more than that, rendering the tagline somewhat misleading.

Upon her father's death, Snow Delaney finds out that she is not the sole beneficiary of her father's unexpectedly generous estate – she has a much older sister, Agnes, who lives in England. With great reluctance, she follows through on her late father's wishes to meet Agnes. When her sister disappears the next day, the same day Sydney was eerily blanketed in red dust, Snow is caught up in an investigation that ultimately leads to her imprisonment.

It's just the kind of story the media loves and reporters are all over the story – including crime reporter Jack Fawcett. When he receives a letter from Snow telling him he's got his facts wrong, he's intrigued; perhaps he will be the one to uncover the truth about Agnes's disappearance. So begins an unlikely and short-lived correspondence between the two, with Snow protesting her innocence and claiming she's been unfairly judged; and Jack digging deeper to find the real truth.

In talking about her inspiration for the book, Overington (a journalist of more than 20 years) says she has met some women "who might be described as evil ... who seem to care for nobody but themselves". The character of Snow, she says, "stands for" these women. Snow is revealed, in part through Jack's investigation, but more so by her own hand, to be a cold, narcissistic woman. Although she is a trained nurse who looks after severely disabled children, she lacks nurturing skills, empathy, compassion and mercy. Here's a sample:

People say that I don't seem to care that my sister went missing after coming all the way out to Australia to visit me, but think about it from my point of view. I didn't want her to come out in the first place.

As a character, Snow is unsettling – it's uncomfortable as a reader to be drawn into her warped mind. Any thought of being on her side (what if she's been framed?), of thinking that maybe there is some horrific thing in her past that has shaped her, is quickly dismissed by the reader. Agnes, her long-lost sister is a complete contrast. Not that she appears much – her character does little more than act as a facilitator for Snow's story. Jack also appears as a counter to Snow – both are engaged in telling stories and therefore both deal with truth as they know it. However, Jack's character takes a back seat to Snow's domineering character; the reader is left knowing little about him, other than what he reports. Is this clever manipulation on the part of the author – under-develop one character so your emotions are bound to be stimulated by the more dominant character?

Sisters of Mercy is a challenging and provocative read that has the potential to polarise readers with its controversial take on the effectiveness of the justice and welfare systems. Overington's views on the lack of support for some people in our society – in this case, severely disabled children and their parents – are made clear in a way that she never could have in journalistic writing. Perhaps this book serves as an outlet for her frustrations? Regardless, Overington is a gifted writer with a true knack for storytelling – some say she is Australia's answer to Jodi Picoult. I say she gives Picoult a run for her money. I recommend this book highly, in the knowledge that some will find Snow's voice hard to hear, and look forward to reading more from Overington.

Trivia: The aptness of Snow's name to her character is clear – both are cold. However, snow is often described as pure, which is what the name Agnes means (it also means chaste). So, consider this quote from William Shakespeare's Hamlet: "Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, though shalt not escape calumny". Calumny means a false or malicious statement designed to injure the reputation of someone or something. Tell me that's not ironic.

Available from good bookstores and Random House. This copy was courtesy of Random House.

Hayley Waterhouse says

I thought this book was great. Reading other reviews I was warned that this book doesn't tie up loose ends so I was prepared for that (otherwise I too may have been disappointed). I still felt satisfied at the end of the book and I guess real life doesn't always finish neatly. A journalist provides commentary around a sequence of letters he receives from a woman (Snow) in gaol with whom he is corresponding. For me, the book's value lies in Snow's psyche. Reading the perception of the journalist (media, general public) and then Snow's interpretation of events is fascinating and shocking. I read this book fairly quickly and really enjoyed it.

Other people have criticised the author for making obvious errors. I don't know enough to let that ruin the story for me. However, I did find the journalist (Jack) spoke in language that didn't seem to fit a city journalist. Snow's voice was a good fit, but I felt that Jack was maybe a bit too country? A similar voice appeared in 'I came to say goodbye' and fit the protagonist in that book perfectly (by the way I STRONGLY recommend that book). I only really noticed it at the start and then was absorbed in the story so it didn't affect me the whole time. If the language was a bit different for Jack, and if there were a few more loose ends tied up I would definitely rate this book 5 stars. At the same time I respect the author's decision - because if I feel frustrated with loose ends reading a novel, imagine how it must be for families dealing with unresolved crimes their entire lives.

If you enjoy true crime type programs/books, stories set in Sydney or easy to read language I think you will really enjoy this book.

Brenda says

Snow Delaney had been sentenced to several years in prison for child abuse and horrific acts of neglect. She started writing to Jack Fawcett, a newspaper journalist, from prison, protesting her innocence, and telling Jack he had his 'facts' wrong in the articles he was reporting about her, and the case, and she would set him right.

So began a year long correspondence between Snow and Jack, with him doing a lot of research on the story, and her continuing to add information and detail about her life through her letters. In the midst of his research, he interviewed Ruby, who was the daughter of Agnes, Snow Delaney's long lost sister. Snow knew nothing about Agnes, indeed, Agnes knew nothing about Snow...Agnes believed herself to be an orphan, deserted when a youngster in London, when her father went away to war, and her mother placed her in an orphanage to be cared for, always promising to return after the war to get her.

When Snow's father died, and the will was read, it was discovered that Snow indeed had a sibling, Agnes, and they were to each receive 50% of the substantial estate...Agnes was delighted to find she had a sister, and determined to come to Australia to visit Snow. Snow was not so delighted, and was angry she had to give half her share of her fathers' estate to a total stranger. When Agnes disappeared the day she was to catch the plane back to London, and Snow was subsequently sent to prison, Jack was the one person still trying to piece the facts together.

I found this story engaging, but bland. There didn't seem to be a lot happening, with almost the complete story done with letters. It was interesting enough that I read to the finish, as I wanted to see the outcome, but I was disappointed in the lack of action, and of 'things unfinished'. I was also disappointed to discover Overington had facts wrong in this book too, as she has in previous books of hers I have read. She said, among other things, that Robert Farquharson was convicted and sent to prison for murdering his three sons in a dam in Melbourne. It was actually a dam in Winchelsea, Victoria, which is just over 110 kms from Melbourne. Those facts (if she wants to put them into fiction) are not hard to get correct.

Overall, I would have to say the story had promise, but the execution left me feeling a little cheated.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

"Some people might be wondering what exactly Snow hoped to gain by writing to me, but I reckon it was pretty obvious: I'm a reporter, and she wanted to convince people that she's innocent of everything she's ever been accused of doing."

Snow Delaney begins a year long correspondence with journalist Jack Fawcett from her prison cell shortly after being convicted on multiple counts of child abuse. Incensed by what she perceives to be sensationalist reporting on her life in his newspaper feature, 'The Secrets of Snow', she offers to tell Jack 'the facts', including the truth of what she knows about her missing sister, Agnes Moore.

Through Snow's letters and Jack's investigation into her claims, Sisters of Mercy reveals a complex web of lies, deceit, betrayal and the absence of mercy.

Initially it's tempting to sympathise with Snow who is imprisoned, alone and resolute in her claims of innocence. Snow is a very disconcerting character, she seems rather ordinary but slowly Overington reveals a deeply disturbed woman whose grasp on reality is warped by a distressing lack of humanity. As a trained nurse who is a foster mother and respite carer for severely disabled children she presents as a tirelessly selfless member of the community. The first hint of her true nature comes when Snow discovers the existence of an older sister, Agnes Moore, abandoned as a toddler in wartime England by her parents who were unmarried at the time.

Interestingly, Overington approaches the disappearance of Agnes from an oblique angle where the missing woman is a catalyst for Snow's story rather than the focus of the plot. It is a little disorientating to expect the novel to develop one way only for it to be twisted into something quite different. It may not appeal to everyone, but the approach is intriguing and revitalises a familiar trope.

What Jack surmises contrasts sharply with Snow's perceptions and emphasises the ambiguity of 'truth' in the absence of incontrovertible evidence. Jack's narrative serves as a witness of sorts to counter Snow's impassioned claims of innocence and champion her alleged victims.

Sisters of Mercy is a provocative novel by an accomplished storyteller. I found it to be discomforting yet engaging and I am happy to recommend it.

Kj says

Three stars but I would've given it four if there wasn't a glaring factual error. Prisoners can not take personal items into remand with them! And I'm confident that's not just the particular jail in this book. Caroline Overington writes well, I've enjoyed her three books but every single one has had an error like this and it gets in the way of me truly enjoying them. More attention to detail from the author AND the editing team would help.

Suzanne says

Due to my association with this site, I read too many reviews of books I've not yet read. Not always a bad thing but often I know too much going in. So I'd read too many on this one, and knew straight away this book would be finishing on a vague note, lacking resolution. This was the case but I still thoroughly enjoyed it. I think this author is one talented lady, covering her field of expertise with talent and poise. I enjoyed our protagonist, Snow, a troubled woman who'd survived a fractured upbringing by completing her nursing degree. What a nutty lady.. Clever but so so warped. As we so often see she had succumbed to just a plainly rotten guy, and did terrible things. It's always interesting reading about psychotic/psychopathic individuals where they always have a reason for the horrors they commit, or more correctly a justification in Snow's case. I came across this author a couple of years ago and am very glad I did. Also I'm rapt that I picked up another of her books yesterday at a charity store. Recommended to readers who are happy to read about crazy people with crazy minds! I hope you can experience this author's talent at some stage, she is very clever indeed.

Rachel says

The end was disappointing, but I really enjoyed the reading of this book.

Bree T says

Snow Delaney was born a generation apart and half a world away from her older sister, Agnes. Until the death of Snow's father, she never even knew that Agnes existed. Agnes was born in England, placed in an orphanage during the Second World War when her father was off fighting and when her parents came back for her at the end of the war, she had vanished. Agnes' parents moved to Australia and many years later, along came Snow.

When Snow's father dies, years after her mother, she discovers that she is not the sole beneficiary of his estate like she assumed. And his estate amounts to much more than the old 3br house in Deer Park that Snow grew up in. It also includes some prime pieces of land down at Ocean Grove on the Bellarine Peninsula that's going to be worth a tidy sum. Unfortunately for Snow, she can't gain access to anything until she meets with her older sister and offers her half of the estate.

And now Agnes has gone missing, swallowed up in the red dust storm that blanketed the entire city of Sydney in September of 2009. Visiting from England, she was due to fly home the next day and because of the dust and cancelled flights, there was some delay before she was reported missing. Now Snow is in jail, not charged with murder, but believed of having committed it. Without a body, without evidence though, it looks like the case of Agnes might never be solved.

Incensed by what reporter Jack Fawcett has printed about Snow in the newspaper, she writes to him from her cell at Silverwater Correctional Facility. Jack writes back, questioning Snow on certain things and Snow keeps writing letters, telling her side of the story, the way things have been for her, rebutting Jack's assumptions and statements. Is Snow just a victim or circumstances and a slack department who should've done better? Or is she truly a monster?

Sisters Of Mercy is Australian author Caroline Overington's fourth fiction novel and once again Overington employs her trademark tactic of narrating the story from an older male character, slightly removed from the main story line. In this book we are getting the facts from reporter Jack Fawcett, who drew the short straw and was ordered off to a press conference by Rose Bay police station about the missing woman Agnes, from Britain. After striking up a friendship with Agnes' daughter Ruby, he takes an interest in the case and does his own research. It is one of the pieces that he writes that raises Snow's ire and she takes it upon herself to write to him and set him straight.

The story of Snow's life seemed ideal on the surface but as she begins to pour her story out to Jack in letters, it becomes quite obvious that scratch the surface, and Snow's life was one of neglect, but not in the usual way. She was fed and clothed but her mother was cold, distant, not particularly interested in having a child, or being active in Snow's life. Her father seemed to only have eyes for her mother and it seemed that Snow had no real friends growing up, no one but one loser boyfriend after another, men who had a profound impact on her life and the choices she made. A deftly weaved tale of shades of grey leads the reader through Snow's life as she falls from one job to the next, moves around and supports her boyfriend who puts most of what she makes through the pokies and on the punt.

Through Ruby we learn about Agnes and the life she had growing up, first in the orphanage and then sent out to Australia after the war to work for a family in a homestead in Western Australia. Like Snow had no idea of her existence, she had no idea that her parents had survived the war and had also ended up in Australia. She didn't become aware of any of this until after her father died and she was tracked down by his lawyer.

I found myself utterly engrossed in this story – Snow was such an interesting character, so utterly without emotion, detached from everything, beaten down by working in a system that took young optimists, chewed them up and spat them out as jaded robots. She ended up a foster carer for handicapped children, giving parents respite care and often taking in children who had been abandoned to the care of the state by parents who just could not cope anymore. It sounds admirable, until you delve a little deeper into Snow's house and methods and then all of a sudden you find yourself horrified. But how much of it was Snow's fault? She exploited a system that was ripe for it, she was essentially, neglected again by those in charge and if she cut corners in order to be able to get things done, then who could blame her? If it wasn't her, it'd be somebody else. Sisters Of Mercy exposes some flaws in the care system and lays bare the grim life that some children like the ones depicted in this story must surely face. So confident is Snow that her behaviour was nothing short of dutiful and professional that it's chilling. And then it's almost convincing before you pull yourself up sharply and go hang on this is not normal!

Another really addictive story from an author who has become an autobuy for me.

Laura Burleigh says

I've never felt so cheated by a book before in my life. Caroline Overington's Sisters of Mercy promised crime, mystery and intrigue but it was none of that - the plot was boring in parts and I found the description of how the children were treated disgusting to say the least!

Rebecca says

I found this very lazy story telling. Lots of stereotypes and disappointing ending. Sensationalist child abuse storyline.

Carolyn says

I'd like to rate this as 3.5 as it's more than a 3 but not quite a 4. I enjoyed the book very much but found the ending just too frustratingly open-ended without some hints of what might have happened. The main character, Snow Delaney, is in prison charged with child abuse and neglect. A qualified nurse she had been fostering severely disabled children in a large house belonging to an elderly women who was a close neighbour and surrogate aunt of her partner Mark. Mark has a gambling addiction and spends most of the money Snow receives for fostering the children. When a journalist Jack Fawcett writes a story about Snow she starts to write to him from prison to tell him the 'real' story and the story unfolds slowly in a progressive series of letters.

Snow has also been implicated in the disappearance of her newly discovered sister Agnes, whose presence in the UK was only discovered when Snow's father died. Agnes travels to Australia to meet Snow but after becoming distressed at what she observes in Snow's home disappears the following morning before her flight home. Although there are some shocking revelations in the book, little more is revealed about Agnes' disappearance. Her body is never found and there is no consideration of other explanations, such as the possibility that Snow's partner could have murdered her without Snow's involvement.

The author is a journalist and I very much enjoyed her clear writing style in telling this story. The story unfolds easily and naturally and the lack of empathy displayed by Snow is quite chilling. However, I think the conclusion was a bit flat and the novel could have been more gripping in places, with a few more hints of what might have happened to Agnes.

Brady says

I expected a lot from this author, yet I was deeply disappointed. The style was off, language was juvenile, characterisation mediocre at best, and the story was just unbelievable at times. Just goes to show that you don't actually have to be a talented writer to get published, you just need friends in the industry.

Helen McKenna says

I have come to expect (and really enjoy) Caroline Overington's unique storytelling style and was definitely not disappointed with her latest novel *Sisters of Mercy*.

Snow Delaney has been jailed for a series of sickening crimes against the children entrusted in her care and after reading a newspaper article about her case she begins a correspondence with the journalist Jack Fawcett. Although unorthodox (and possibly unethical) he continues to stay in touch with Snow, hoping to also get to the bottom of the mysterious disappearance of Snow's long lost sister Agnes. As is typical of Overington, it takes some time to get to the plot depicted on the blurb and the story is mainly told through the eyes of the third party (Jack).

The development of Snow's character is carefully crafted and I must admit I did initially feel quite sympathetic towards her as I read about her emotionally bereft upbringing and her early working life. Having trained as a nurse, she gets a rude shock when she takes a job at a mental hospital in Victoria. Initially full of hope and enthusiasm that she can change the lives of those in her care, she gradually becomes jaded as she realises just how the system works.

Equally important to the story is Jack's character and it is here (as always) that Overington shines. Her stories are all told mainly through the eyes of a middle aged man and she gets this voice amazingly right. From the language/dialogue to the personality traits and beyond, you can picture Jack to a T.

Sad subject matter aside (another common theme of Overington's books), the suspense in *Sisters of Mercy* was great, building as the story unravelled. I really liked how she used a true event (the huge Sydney dust storm of 2009) as the central point around which the story is told. It was on this day that Snow's sister Agnes disappeared from her hotel room, having come all the way from the UK to meet her previously unknown sibling.

As an Australian writer Caroline Overington manages to insert multiple one word references within her stories that immediately transport you to a time and place in our history and culture - brand names, expressions no longer in use, places etc. I love the fact this is done so seamlessly without feeling like you are being "told".

This is probably my favourite Caroline Overington book, my only criticism would be the ambiguous ending. I must admit I felt a bit ripped off having to draw my own conclusion. That aside, it was a fabulous (if not disturbing) read.
