If you’ve read only one of Valerie Nieman’s many innovative books, then prepare to be surprised all over again when you read her most recent novel, *In the Lonely Backwater.* Like North Carolina’s beloved Fred Chappell, Nieman has published in multiple genres, including poetry, dystopian fiction, short fiction, and historical literary fiction (in her 2019 award-winning novel *To the Bones*, about the Farmington coal mine disaster). Now with *In the Lonely Backwater*, set roughly in the Lake Kerr area of North Carolina, Nieman has written an incredibly original fact-based novel. This presumed category shouldn’t put off any mature reader, though. Categories can be deceptive, and so can narrative perspectives. Though the narrator, Maggie Warshauer, is only seventeen, adult readers will find her story fascinating. The theme of alienation, the impressionistic, site-specific description of setting, and the innovative narrative of *In the Lonely Backwater* situate this as a compelling work of fiction for any reader who loves a good mystery. But it’s the voice of the narrator that steers our intrigue through the dark backwaters of this novel.

Mysteries abound concerning seventeen-year-old Lenore Marguerite (Maggie) Warshauer, from Fillayaw Pointe, NC. Ultimately, a savvy reader may see, almost on cue, the cusp of wondering whether Maggie can be a reliable narrator of her own story. How is it that we are persuaded even through her constant contradictions? Maggie has some immature tendencies, yet she’s also disturbingly mature beyond her years. She seems sometimes a little too apathetic about being abandoned by her “so-called mother” (23), yet she entertains flashback memories of her mom frequently and frets about her dad’s addiction to her mom. Maggie seems casually detached from her father’s self-indulgent drunken interludes and his attempts to sober up, yet her livelihood depends solely on him. She works with and for him at the marina, controlling his moods and keeping him focused.

Perhaps the biggest contradiction is that Maggie moves through the rural woods and the lake waters and even her high school hallways as a girl who is curiously independent, yet the very title of the novel explains that she is a lonely, lonely young girl. In fact, Maggie is so lonely that she has created an imaginary boyfriend, Fletcher. And Fletcher is just one of the fascinating quirks that draw us to Maggie, though she never feels sorry for herself, and she is never a victim. Her many genius distractions, imaginary and real, focus her attention on crafting her version of a solitary haven to belie the loneliness over which she has no control. But loneliness is only an existential crisis. Maggie slowly discovers that she is in danger. This information comes to her from Detective Drexel Vann, who is investigating the disappearance of Charisse Swicegood.

The scene-setting plot is at its core a truly original mystery. Charisse, Maggie’s stunning cousin and schoolmate, has gone missing as the novel opens. But the literary narrative is shaped by the study of solitude in the narrator’s life and the living she does all alone. She finds solace in the study of plants and animals, guided by pages from an old book detailing the observations of Carolus Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century Swedish taxonomist. She fancies herself not only as a classifier but as a “scientist.” She describes her aptitude for wandering the woods, for sailing alone on free afternoons in her own small dinghy, *Bellatrix.* How crucial a plot detail that she has named her boat for a star in the Orion constellation, which translates as female warrior.

Maggie describes herself: “Me, I’m a creature like a bear or raccoon, I can live lots of ways. Daughter of Andrew, cleaner of boats, sailor of *Bellatrix* that I built from a derelict, roarer of woods, scientist, stalker of plants and animals, teller of tales” (41). Her most winning feature – and truly her salvation – is that she is indomitably sensitive toward nature, and that includes human nature. But is Maggie Warshauer ultimately a survivor of family dysfunction and social abuse by her peers? Or is she straddling an amoral chasm between the hero and heroine in only her own little fantasy world?

Maggie is maybe most savvy in her self-perception and most misguided when she says she is a scientist. She serves without whim. She is constant in her motivation. And she is wholly objective at her best. Yet how can a teenage girl be a scientist? Maggie fancies herself a classifier as she studies the minutiae of her natural surroundings – birds, tracks, trees, sky, and weather. For all her loneliness and any reader who loves a good mystery.

Valerie Nieman has published five novels – including *To the Bones,* two collections of poetry, and a volume of short stories, *Fabletiques* (Vandala Press, 2004). Her works have previously been reviewed in *NCLR* Originally from West Virginia, Nieman now lives in North Carolina, where she worked as a journalist and a professor. She has written many literary accolades, including a NEA Creative Writing Fellowship. She currently teaches creative writing seminars and is especially well known for her courses at the John C. Campbell Folk School.