THE LONELIEST GIRL IN THE WHOLE USA

a review by
Susan O'Dell Underwood

Valerie Nieman. ***In the Lonely Backwater.*** Regal House/Fitzroy Books, 2022.

SUSAN O'DELL UNDERWOOD directs the creative writing program at Carson-Newman University. She holds a PhD in English from Florida State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from UNC Greensboro. Besides two chapbooks, she has published one full-length collection of poetry, *The Book of Awe* (Iris Press, 2018). And she is the author of the novel *Genesis Road* (Madville Publishing, 2022). Read an essay by this author in *NCLR* 2018.

VALERIE NIEMAN has published five novels – including *To the Bones* (West Virginia University Press, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2020) – three collections of poetry, and a volume of short stories, *Fidelities* (Vandalia 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 won many literary accolades, including an 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.

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 Young Adult 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 impressive 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 teeter on 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 cussedly 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 suspenseful 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

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET D. BAUER

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, roamer 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? Or is the 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 observes 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 smarts, Maggie is hardly endearing, though. And she doesn't ask for the reader to be enamored with her. As she tells her own story, Maggie does not just "come off" as tough. She truly is tough. Of course, she does contrast herself with others her age, but her knowledge of self is resilient, even unbreakable. The story she tells about her self-scrutiny and her world is nothing if not her fortress, up to the very final words she uses to explain her perspective. She is confident to a fault and even abrasive if taken in the context of social graces. Sometimes, if we allow ourselves to be pulled without judgment into her world, Maggie's sense of self is enviable, native, and wild as the landscape around her.

Mid-novel, Maggie ruminates in one of the most telling passages. She considers "The Society Islands" in the lake where she sails. They are too close for "that kind of evolution," which fascinates her. Change, transformation, the way a story can bend, the way a person can be made to believe the facts of a situation – these are Maggie's instruments. She ponders about the "plants and seeds . . . squirrels and rabbits" that "might evolve." Maggie expresses the ultimate question of self when she wonders, in Linnaeus-like fashion, with scrutiny the reader sees directed at herself: "I wonder how long it would take for them to change, to make themselves over in order to survive, to morph into something else?" (90).

What morphing does Maggie do right in front of our eyes, as we turn each page? Readers will find this ever-evolving self-portrait fascinating as Maggie lives through life-threatening dangers, and they will sympathize with a narrator who can barely fancy what it would mean to be a normal teenager. Maggie's true "backwater" is perhaps not her external environment, but the world inside she must navigate. ■

ABOVE **Valerie Nieman reading some of her James Applewhite Poetry Prize finalist poems at Scuppernong Books during *NCLR*'s Poetry Editor's North Carolina book tour, Greensboro, NC, 23 Apr. 2022**