

EMERGENCY SALAD DRESSING

a review by Wendy Tilley

Ena Jones. *Six Feet Below Zero*.
Holiday House Press, 2021.

Since the passing of both their parents in a car accident three years earlier, the Spreen siblings – twelve-year-old Marigold “Rosie” Spreen and her brother Baker Spreen, her junior by a year – have been living in the house of their Great Grammy “in suburban Maryland, on ten acres of land just 9.3 miles from the White House” (6). And while the “past-its-peak house” isn’t what Rosie wants (she envies the McMansions which surround it), Great Grammy does her best to instill in her and her brother a love for the old family home and warn them against their grandmother, Gram “Grim” Hesper, a money-hungry, mendacious lawyer who would “sell King Construction the whole kit and caboodle if she ever had the chance” (7).

Rosie and Baker come home from school one day to find Great Grammy dead in her favorite chair with an open notebook in her lap. The notebook, fortunately or unfortunately, happens to be open to the page detailing what the kids should do in case she dies: put her corpse in the new deep freezer she bought and installed in the basement (hence the book’s title), keep Grim Hesper in the dark as long as possible to prevent the selling of the house, find Great Grammy’s will (which she has misplaced), and reach out to Aunt Tilly (daughter of Grim Hesper) to come home, take care of them, and help them avoid losing their family home. And that is just where *Six Feet Below Zero* starts.

So if that sounds like a complicated plot to set up in the first chapter (chapter “Zero,” as the

chapters in the books are styled as degrees), the novel only grows more complicated as it progresses. On top of the dead great-grandmother, the evil grandmother, and the absent aunt, there is a mysterious grave on the property, a nosy, but friendly, neighbor Rosie’s age who keeps showing up at all the wrong times, a sick puppy, falling trees, lots of homework, lots of food, and a constant barrage of phone calls, emails, and knocks at the door. And it all serves the book well. Deftly handled by author Ena Jones, the plot ramps up the tension in short, page-turning chapters that move with the frantic energy and speed of Grim Hesper’s red sports car.

On a stylistic level, there is novel and surprising figurative language throughout. While recollecting about summer yardwork, Rose opines that “Bright green was my favorite time of year” (25). And there are apposite similes such as “We didn’t discuss Grim Hesper’s message, so at breakfast on Friday the kitchen phone was still flashing, like a lighthouse warning us away from a dangerous shoreline” (72). This level of technical competence in crafting a fast-moving, entertaining plot decked with figurative language that reinforces that plot (is enough to ensure readers of any age that turning over a few hours of their life to *Six Feet Below Zero* was a good choice to make.

Though Grim Hesper is the evil grandmother from so many fairy tales, the novel’s cast is very much composed of human, rounded characters. Like Lewis

Carroll’s Alice, Rosie Spreen is a kid – thorns and all – with her own set of strengths and weaknesses, one of those weaknesses being her quick temper, as when, early on, she remarks, “I didn’t mean to shout. I’d been working very hard at *not* shouting, or calling names, or being difficult” (2). This gets to the heart of one of the themes of the novel: learning to identify and deal with tough emotions. Near the beginning of the novel, the emotions she feels are described in a visceral way, such as “My heart dropped and a rotten kind of ugliness spread from my stomach to my shoulders” (33). Rosie is aware that she is feeling something; she just doesn’t have the emotional vocabulary to define it.

The book lists its intended audience to be eight to twelve years old, which seems right. Not only does the book have a fast-moving, young person-focused plot; there are real stakes – a dead great-grandmother, an endangered family home, a sick puppy – and it is firmly planted in the present day, cell phones and all. Beyond this, Rosie is very relatable to people of any age. She recalls, for example, that when her great-grandmother bought her a much-desired smartphone, “Less than forty-eight hours later, I was sneaking looks at my new phone every chance I got, same as everyone else at school” (22).

As much as it was desired, the cellphone also signals Rosie’s move into the adult world, and

the dangers and responsibilities of that world, again showing the care Jones has taken to tie all aspects of the plot to her themes. And in spite of the dead great-grandmother hidden in a deep freezer and grandkids lying to avoid the discovery of her death, the tone is comic enough to undercut what could be a very macabre plot. The novel is ultimately an imminently entertaining, can’t-put-it-down experience – a good reason to read a book at any age. Will Grim Hesper succeed in taking the house? Will Rosie learn to understand and deal with her emotions? What about that grave on the property? And the sick puppy? Well, you will have to pick up a copy of *Six Feet Below* to find out. ■

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A member of the Society of Children’s Book Writers & Illustrators since 2004, and the author of the YA novels *Clayton Stone*, *At Your Service* (Holiday House, 2015) and *Clayton Stone, Facing Off* (Holiday House, 2016), ENA JONES grew up on the outskirts of Washington, DC, and currently lives in North Carolina.