

## THE THINGS WE FEARED

*a review by Wendy Tilley*

Megan Miranda. *Such a Quiet Place*. Simon and Schuster, 2021.

**WENDY TILLEY** earned her master's degree in English, with a concentration in creative writing, at ECU, where she worked as an editorial assistant for *NCLR*.

**MEGAN MIRANDA** is the author of six Young Adult novels and seven psychological thrillers, including *The Last to Vanish* (Simon and Schuster, 2022; reviewed in *NCLR Online Winter 2023*) and the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Last House Guest* (Simon and Schuster, 2019) and *The Perfect Stranger* (Simon and Schuster 2017). She grew up in New Jersey, attended MIT, and pursued a career in the biotech industry in Boston before moving to North Carolina, where she now lives and writes.

In the small college town of Lake Hollow, VA, fourteen months before Megan Miranda's *Such a Quiet Place* begins, a double murder occurred. Brandon and Fiona Truett, residents of the Hollow's Edge neighborhood (a couple that none of the other neighbors particularly liked) were found dead in their home. From the police investigation that followed, it became apparent that someone entered their home in the middle of the night, started their car in the garage, opened the door leading into their house, and left the exhaust to slowly strangle them. In a surprising turn of events, their twenty-four-year-old next-door neighbor, Ruby Fletcher, who cared for the Truetts' dog whenever they were gone, was arrested for the crime, tried, and convicted.

These events had shocked the town, become a lurid sensation at the College of Lake Hollow (where Brandon Truett was the head of admissions and from which Ruby Fletcher had graduated), and changed the Hollow's Edge community from a place where neighbors could "name every family on the street" (21) to a place where people "slowly disappeared" (11). Once open and gregarious neighbors "hardened" and became "skeptical, wary, impenetrable" (18). In short, this was the kind of event that the whole town sought to get past, and they thought the twenty-year sentence Ruby Fletcher received would give them time to do just that. But then the police investigation is found to be corrupt – evidence had been suppressed – and Ruby Fletcher's conviction is overturned after only fourteen months of confinement.



COURTESY OF MEGAN MIRANDA

And that is when the novel begins – with Harper Nash, the novel's first-person narrator, processing the news that Ruby, her once best friend and housemate, turned convicted murderer has been freed. Understandably, Harper's a little on edge, and when she hears a noise in her house and "spins from the kitchen counter, knife still in [her] hand, blade haphazardly pointed outward" (5) to find Ruby standing in her door, that edge becomes even sharper.

With a book focused on solving the little and big mysteries of Ruby and Harper, to go any farther with this plot summary would be to rob the reader of what is most compelling about this mystery: the plot. To be sure, there are themes wrestled with in the book – the amorality of "being polite," the compromises we make to fit in and what they cost us, the personal animus that can take root in small communities – but for the most part this is an entertaining murder mystery, a "beach read," and a good one.

And Miranda's prose style fits the beach read genre. Her

sentences are always in service of the mystery, with a simple style light on metaphors, dependent clauses, or rhetorical flourishes. Such would distract from what matters: the novel is a compelling page turner

that meets the expectations of the mystery genre head on, while maybe subverting an expectation or two. There is a large but manageable cast of characters (think *And Then There Were None*), well-earned red herrings, and enough genuine clues for the savvy reader to figure stuff out on her own. The setting is appealing (especially for academics): summer in a small college town, in a neighborhood full of college staff and faculty. And the satire of HOAs, property values, and cookie-cutter townhomes is subtle but enjoyable: Harper, even as she is trying to figure out Ruby's intentions, can't help but notice the renovations and decorations of all the other houses (which are subtle variations on her own home's floorplan). For instance, Harper lets us know early on that "the renters had all gotten out when they could, but the rest of us couldn't sell without taking a major loss right now" (11), and that the neighbors had joined together to care for the Truetts' vacant house not so much out of respect for the

dead, but for their own return on investment.

The contemporary setting is also something at which Miranda excels. Doorbell cameras, online message boards (okay, maybe that's not so contemporary anymore), and cell phones figure heavily; screenshots condemn or exonerate, cast doubt or remove suspicion. Theories are spun from blog posts, grainy images, and digital surmise. Miranda is a veteran writer of the mystery genre, and to see her tackle these contemporary forms of evidence, and life, in the plot (and the trial that takes place before the action begins) is refreshing.

In demonstrating the corrupting nature of all the little compromises the people in this community made to get along – to be polite, friendly even, but fundamentally dishonest and unkind – Miranda succeeds in painting every character as inherently flawed, though not without humanity. But even without a true hero to root for, the plot keeps us going to see how their story ended.

As Freeman Dyson said, "It is better to be wrong than to be vague."<sup>\*</sup> And while I think many of these characters make wrong decisions and are unlikeable, they are fully realized, and that makes them, and Miranda's story, compelling, and so I recommend this book to all mystery fans. You may leave conflicted about the characters, you may question some of their actions near the end, but you will have a hard time putting this book down. ■

ABOVE Megan Miranda at Barnes & Noble in Huntersville, NC, 15 Apr. 2024

<sup>\*</sup> Freeman Dyson, "The World on a String," *New York Review of Books* 13 May 2004: [web](#).