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Lucius Shepard

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A chilling and mysterious voice becomes audible to Sanie shortly after she and her husband Jackson move into the decaying antebellum mansion that is the Bullard ancestral home in rural South Carolina. At first, she wonders if the voice might be a prank played by Jackson's peyote-popping brother Will or his equally off-kilter sister Louise. But soon Sanie discovers that the ghostly voice is merely a single piece in the decadent, baroque puzzle that comprises the Bullard family history rank with sensuality, violence, repression and madness.

Softspoken Details

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Author : Lucius Shepard

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From Reader Review Softspoken for online ebook

Loren says

Southern Gothic about a family going mad because their home may be engulfed in a vortex that draws in ghosts, the spirits of living people, reflections of the future, and crows. Or maybe not. Told by the least interesting character in the book, a bored housewife who can't be bothered to leave a loveless marriage and who becomes an unaware and inactive ghost. I don't know why I finished reading this.

Devo says

For the most part, I really enjoyed this book. Some lines are laugh-out-loud funny, but sometimes Shepard goes on a tangent (Sanie's an aspiring author, and Shepard unnecessarily inserted some of her writing into the story). I would definitely recommend reading this novel, but only if you don't mind having unanswered questions when you finish.

Mary Kay says

Satisfyingly spooky! A genre blend of sci-fi, horror, and mystery, this is also a good old-fashioned haunted house story in the southern gothic tradition. Dorky sci-fi humor keeps it from getting too dark.

Desperate main character, Sanie, hears voices calling to her in her new home, a rumbling old mansion filled with family history. This history is her husband's, not her own, and at the moment their marriage is faltering, so she feels left to sort out the phenomenon of the voices herself -- meanwhile contending with her husband's two off-kilter siblings, also in residence. There's something about this house that everyone in town seems to know except Sanie...and in her quest to understand these unsettling experiences, she becomes acquainted with some very big small-town personalities. Her quest, unfortunately, goes a little too far. Strong sense of place, humor and horror reminiscent of Stephen King.

Seoda says

Sigh. I liked what little there was of it, until the last vaguely crappy-thriller-movie-esque section. I read it in its entirety in one sitting, and felt more irritated than anything else when it was over. Also, this is one of those stories where most the characters are vaguely unsympathetic, and the ones that piqued my interest-- such as the sister-- were never given a full "reveal". Perhaps my desire for more closure runs counter to the spirit of the book, but the writing style pulled me in, and then the story just didn't do it for me.

Cathy Green says

Softspoken, a southern gothic novel from Lucius Shepard opens with Sanie Bullard wallowing in boredom, sipping a Diet Coke, and staring at the out of date farm supplies company calendar on the refrigerator. Then she hears what we later learn is the Bullard family ghost. Sanie has been left to her own devices ever since

she and her husband Jackson moved back to his family's rural antebellum South Carolina manse so that he could cram for the bar exam without distraction. Unfortunately, Sanie falls into the distraction category. With Jackson locked in his late father's study, his brother Will in his bedroom tripping on peyote, and his sister Louise locked in her room hiding from the world, there isn't much for Sanie to do other than dwell on the sorry state of her marriage and to hear what she assumes are the imaginary voices of her bored mind.

Feeling isolated, bored and discontented, Sadie amuses herself by wandering down the road to the local general store and gas station dressed like Daisy Duke and thinking somewhat contemptuous thoughts about the locals. Her first time visiting the store she learns from the proprietor that the Bullards have a reputation that tends towards crazy. She also finds out that three generations of Bullard men have left home as soon as possible, only to return home and never leave after the deaths of their fathers. Rayfield, Jackson's late father, after a long, respected political career in Charleston, is generally thought to have "went strange" immediately upon moving back to the family manor. This is definitely unwelcome news for Sanie.

Sanie initially assumed that the voice she had been hearing were the result of boredom or a prank being played upon her by the Bullard siblings. However, while talking with Will, albeit after he has taken eight peyote buttons, she realizes that he can hear the voice as well and learns that the family has a ghost named Wallace. And that Wallace is kind of lame. Sanie attempting to have bitchy conversations with Wallace offer some moments of levity in an otherwise dark book.

Sanie eventually comes to the conclusion that there is more at work than the family ghosts and comes to believe that the house is surrounded by some sort of supernatural vortex of evil that has been growing through the years by feeding on the Bullard family. There's clearly something wrong, but Sanie and Will only see the vortex after taking hallucinogenic drugs, so whether the vortex is an expression of Sanie's psychological state or an actual physical manifestation of evil is up to the reader to decide.

It's certainly possible, to quote Shirley Jackson, that the Bullard ancestral home is one of the houses that was "born bad," but the characters' actions can also be attributed to mental illness, depression and/or a deteriorating marriage. Perhaps it is a combination of those. Regardless, *Softspoken* is an interestingly creepy short novel of decay.

Kit says

okay.. i liked this book until i finished it. *what* exactly happens at the end? throughout the entire book you're left expecting a solution to the dilemma she finds herself trapped in, and then of course, by the end you tell yourself, the solution is coming. and then it just sort of tapers off.. i assume she dies? it's very vague on everything near the end, all we know is that this supposed "vortex" has screwed up the minds of everything she knows, and she has to escape it. so where is that escape?? was the entire purpose of this book to experiment on a certain mood, the trapped abandonment she experiences throughout? the plot thus has no real ending, no real resolution. things are left extremely open to interpretation, and i'm not sure i like that. i don't think i like any ending where i'm left repeatedly scratching my head and trying to make sense of head over tail. this book had promise throughout, the prose was beautifully written, but it fell apart, in my opinion, by the end. too much of that presenting the problem well, and then a feeling like that author didn't quite know how to resolve the problem he's built for his protagonist, so he just writes it off the easiest way he could. but despite the poor ending, it's not bad, just that it had the potential to be so much more. i still give it two and a half stars--if the ending was more complete, i'd give it another star with some change. a damn shame.

and by the way, since she's dead now, something's gotta be done with her body. since frank dean is the one

who last sees her alive, wouldn't blame more be put on him than rightfully on Jackson? poor guy. he was only trying to help.

Lori says

I was hopefully intrigued by this little book. The premise reminded me of one of my favorite little sub genres of story: Irritating/Unlikeable Rich People Get Haunted. There was a certain formula movie in the 1960s and 1970s where an ensemble cast of wealthy d-bags would find themselves in a haunted house for a long weekend. The premise generally involved some super monied dead relative who had written a tenet in his will that required said d-bags to be present in the creepy manse in order to collect the inheritance. Generally the characters were so unpleasant and greedy that you, as a viewer, rooted enthusiastically for the forces of malevolence.

I was hoping for something like this to go down in *Softspoken*: a slender book about a young married couple who end up moving in to the husband's family home while he ostensibly studies for the bar. The old house is already home to Jackson's (the husband) odd brother and sister, Will and Louise. Will is a sloppy peyote abuser and kinky sex aficionado. The main character, Jackson's wife Sanie, has an antagonistic relationship with Will and it feels like we are really supposed to dislike him. As much of a creeper as Will is, I actually found him to be one of the more enjoyable characters...which is already saying something to me as a reader.

Louise is merely a will-o-the-wisp shadow character who is never fleshed out in any way. Certainly she is depicted as being damaged by her childhood with this dysfunctional family in this eerie house. But this is never explored and becomes a non satisfying dead end.

Along with the living inhabitants of the home, there are the dead. Soon after arriving at the Bullard House, Sanie becomes aware of the fact that she can see (and occasionally hear) these shades from the past. The presence of the ghosts was interesting. Again, I wish the author had done more with them. Who are they? What were their stories? What was their connection with Bullard House? None of this is delineated in any real way.

Sanie and Jackson's already strained relationship becomes more fraught with each passing day in the house. They are obviously headed for disaster...supernatural or perhaps, more mundane tragedy. I found both characters to be annoying and not in a good way. Sanie seemed like a spoiled brat and Jackson just came off as a cold fish.

There is a culmination at the end of the story and somewhat interesting premise about the power of the house. Generally readers on here complain that books are too long and that certain authors are too verbose and require some paring down at the editor's desk. Perhaps my general preference for description and detail and the careful 'setting of a scene' is coloring my view of *Softspoken*. However, I honestly believe that the book I just read needed to be LONGER! The brief story as is provides a promising outline {or 'treatment'} for a fully fledged story. I just did not find that fully fleshed out story in these pages.

Nancy Oakes says

There are different types of ghosts at work in this story, meaning that there are ghosts you can see and hear,

and then there are the ghosts you can't lay to rest that lay within you personally. This book, on that level, reminded me somewhat of Stephen King's book *The Shining*, where isolation leads to a spiral into the dark side.

On the surface, Shepard's book is a ghost story, but it's mingled with a bit of drama on the domestic front. Jackson and Sanie Bullard are living in a small town in South Carolina, the old homestead of Jackson's family. Jackson has left his lucrative career to study for the bar exam, and feels that this can only be accomplished in the solitude of the old family home. In the house with them are Will, Jackson's brother (a peyote addict who sees visions) and Louise, the sister who isn't quite all there. Sanie is young, and had at one time aspired to be a writer; now all she feels is that Jackson's self-imposed isolation is killing her marriage and a part of herself as well.

So while there are ghosts at work here, the real story is not a supernatural one, but rather a very real look at forces beyond Sanie's control that compel her to try to save what little of herself that she can before the house and its ghosts go to work on her.

Very understated, Shepard's prose is so awesome that when he describes Sanie's first foray into the effects of peyote, you can totally feel it at work in yourself.

Beware: there are no answers here, and the ending is quite abrupt and mysterious, so if you need explanations you may not get them. I wouldn't recommend this to just anyone; mainstream readers probably wouldn't like it much. But if you want a wholly different reading experience, then give it a try. The writing alone is well worth the time you put into it.

Bryce says

While the writing itself was beautiful, this book left me yawning and irritated. I am a sucker for plot and for characters with sweeping arcs. I want rises and falls and lessons learned. I don't necessarily need a happy ending, but I do want a definitive ending.

Softspoken, with its trapped characters and moment-of-a-life style, was not my cup of tea at all.

M Griffin says

Sanie Bullard has accompanied her husband Jackson back to his rural home town in South Carolina. Jackson wants to study for the bar, and Sanie is left on her own so much that she's forced to confront just how lacking her marriage is. Jackson's ancestral home, occupied by his crazy brother and sister, seems to be haunted by some kind of quiet, whispering spirit. Sanie keeps herself occupied by hanging around down at the country store half a mile down the road, and finds herself drawn by the flirtations of a local mechanic. The story feels like it's less about the haunting and its affect on the Bullard clan over the generations, and more about Sanie feeling stuck in a bad marriage, trying to work up the courage or energy to do something about it.

Shepard writes beautiful, lush and detailed descriptions of the world of the story. He also does a great job getting into the head of the main character as well as drawing convincing portraits of the characters around her. The Southern Gothic quality is well done. I rate this book an extra star just for these things, matters of the writer's craft.

On the other hand, I found the story too static, lacking even the amount of progression you'd normally find in a short story.

If you're more interested in expressive writing than plot, and don't mind a story that ends not too far from where it began, you may really love this. My own judgment is that I found a lot to like about the writing itself but found the story somewhat slight. I'll gladly investigate Shepard's other work, but the only recommendation I can give this book is conditional. Some readers will enjoy the stillness, others will be irritated at the "stuck" characters and situations.

jillian says

I found this book to be unpleasant to read - but only for me. I dislike books where the protagonist is trapped, unable to simply leave a bad or deteriorating situation. And in "Softspoken", that's exactly the case. The main character is stuck in a haunted family home, with her husband, his crazy druggie brother, and their possibly autistic sister. And, unlike most of those ancestral Southern homes, this one is hopeless, without charm, and too decayed to love. As Sanie wanders the house, taking peyote in order to see the ghosts, and investigating the family's history, I keep wanting to tell her to leave, to run away. Like Truman's "Other Voices, Other Rooms," it's disturbing in that you know there's an unpleasant history, and you know that the hero doesn't belong there - but you can't make them leave and get back to the real world.

Therese says

Everyone who doesn't know how it ended.

She died, that terrible pain she was barely aware of below her breast was likely a stab wound. She died in the ditch, her soul was sucked back into the vortex of the house, and now she haunts it with all the other ghosts she'd seen on the peyote. Her haunting path is to walk downstairs and stare at the calender, same as she did while she was living. While a man, likely Jackson who was likely murdered by Dean, chases after her.

She was a trapped ghost in life same as death. She was no better off in life, she squandered and haunted even when she had a chance not to.

And now that I've written all that out I have to admit it's pretty neat and have to raise the star score.

Bookmarks Magazine says

Hugo and Nebula Award winner Lucius Shepard reveals himself as the master of the ghost story in *Softspoken*, a short novel packed with plenty of atmosphere and big scares. (Shepard's best work to date has been his novellas, which explains the success of such a compressed novel.) Critics favorably compare *Softspoken* to *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Ghost Story*, and *Bag of Bones*, among other horror classics, and to the work of Tim Powers and James Blaylock, who have similarly crossed over. They also praise Shepard's ability to balance a conventional southern gothic__including convincing minor characters__with the tautness of a well-paced psychological thriller.

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Koeeoaddi says

One of the most astonishingly *creepy* books I've ever read -- a horrifying little ghost story that seemed like just another dreary tale of marital ennui, until....

Happy Halloween, Mr. Shepard. I'll be visiting your claustrophobic, hopeless, depressing, haunted vortex for many nights to come.

Trudi says

Loved the strong female narrative voice. Great descriptive prose. HATED the ending. Too ambiguous, not enough closure. Very dissatisfying. Would definitely read more by this author though.
