

Anacacho, by Louise Gaylord - A debut that fuses the Gothic novel and mystery

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Some things are possible in Texas that are, at best, unlikely in the rest of this country. There's all that vast and often bleak landscape, more oil money than is probably healthy, the proximity to the border and, of course, the sense that perhaps the Wild West is not entirely dead.

In her first novel, Santa Barbara's Louise Gaylord pulls all this in and manages a fusion of the Gothic novel and the mystery. Ms. Gaylord's debut effort doesn't pretend to be high literature; rather, she writes, primarily for women, a tightly woven story that keeps itself moving and you guessing.

Heroine Allie Armington is the requisite 30ish, plucky, slightly maverick woman with some confidence issues; she's not a professional sleuth but an attorney whose father taught her and her drop-dead gorgeous sister, who models internationally, all they need to know about how to handle a gun. Allie likes men and, although her luck with them isn't great, they seem to like her back.

The primary man in her life at the moment is Duncan, a fellow attorney. He is in many ways the perfect guy: He's attentive, forgiving, patient, loving, a wonderful cook, romantic, an apparently accomplished lover, but he clings a little and is given to humming tunes from "Brigadoon" as he whips out his latest culinary accomplishment.

As she settles comfortably into a routine with Duncan and uncomfortably into her job as a district attorney, Allie receives a call from Reena Carpenter, just the kind of woman who would fit right into a contemporary Southfork. Reena was the beauty when they met in college, and after befriending Allie, Reena stole and married her boyfriend, Paul Carpenter. Seven years later, the picture-perfect life Reena has assembled seems to be falling apart.

For reasons not entirely clear, Allie agrees to accompany her former friend back to the ranch, Anacacho, a huge spread, complete with its own airport, dotted with cattle and furiously pumping oil wells and capped with a massive stone manse. Sparks still fly when our heroine meets her former beau, and the ranch weekend is peppered in anomalies that will begin to add up as the story progresses.

Not long after this strange weekend, Reena turns up with her throat broadly slit, and her husband, who has made no secret about his mistress, is the primary suspect. Allie cannot resist, and soon she is drawn into the ever compounding puzzle of the Carpenters' lives,

sleuthing her way into all manner of danger. In the process, she meets Sheriff Bill Cotton. Simply being in his presence makes her knees weak and her head spin; he seems her savior in an exceptionally dangerous situation, yet he also seems connected with the international criminals clearly involved with drugs. It's not clear on which side of the law this man's loyalties stand.

A brutal blow to the back of her head makes Allie suffer amnesia about the events leading up to the apparent murder of Paul Carpenter. As she begins to sort her pieces with the help of a patient and balding therapist, she is drawn back into the puzzle, and it turns out that she is predestined to play a pivotal role in some rather astonishing international crime and genuine madness.

Ms. Gaylord keeps her story moving at a feverish pace and she carefully weaves all her characters into her story. Every one of them is a piece of the puzzle that reshifts and grows every time Allie thinks she might have it figured out. There are some time issues that feel unresolved here; events jump back and forth in time without enough transition, and she often telegraphs Allie's errors.

Not only tight plotting holds the reader's attention: Sexual tension and who will succumb to whom and under what circumstances play an important role.

Allie surrenders slowly to Duncan, would love to trip the sheriff and beat him to the floor and maybe even the altar, has powerful chemistry with Paul Carpenter until she finds out some surprising things about him -- and then there's the brutal villain who would like to get more than his hands on her.

Louise Gaylord's first novel has flaws, but she keeps her book lively and surprising. It will please those who fancy the mystery/Gothic fusion.

"Louise Gaylord has written a suspense novel with enough twists and turns in its plot to satisfy the most demanding mystery reader. The novel is constantly moving in deliciously unpredictable directions. A GOOD READ."