

The Vespertine

By Sandra Mitchell

Review by Macy Watson

If you're not a big fan of historical fiction, but interested in paranormal fiction or romance, or just want a quick interesting read, Sandra Mitchell's *The Vespertine* is a good choice. The book follows a Victorian girl from rural Maine who, while visiting her family in Baltimore, begins to experience odd visions at sunset and inadvertently becomes attracted to an artist with no positive prospects. I found the forbidden romance kind of old and overly-used, but the author compensated with an intriguing spin to the typical historic fiction with the magic powers (though the author doesn't quite explain them, which confused me). The whole story mainly focuses the paranormal, romantic, and the cultural hold on society in Victorian Maine in regards to marriage and relationships between men and women, effectively blending these themes together so that it would appeal to most readers, even those that aren't into heavy reading and those who want a complex book.

The Vespertine is a story told by Amelia van der Broek, whose brother sends her to live with their cousin Zora Stewart and her family in Baltimore, his goal being that she would find a perspective husband. While she is there she begins to have premonitions, images always appearing in the light of the evening sunset (also known then as the vespers, or the evening prayers ironically enough). To further complicate things, she then meets and becomes intrigued by the mysterious Nathaniel Witherspoon, quite literally a starving artist who Amelia's brother would not doubt disapprove of as a suitor. He always appears out of nowhere, and seems to have as many secrets that Amelia now does. Quickly it becomes known that Amelia can see glimpses of the future, and everyone from all social circles come to have their fortunes told, until her darkest vision comes true, and she is separated from everyone she cares about.

Though the book is described as a historical novel, don't be too intimidated by its description. As far as historical fiction goes, *The Vespertine* is fairly light and relatively modern with the vocabulary, and easy to follow if you're not familiar with the Victorian era or historical fiction, but may be a little confusing with some of the details. If you're as interested in richly descriptive and detailed historical fiction as I am, Mitchell's book may come across as a bit of a disappointment, though still enjoyable due to its interesting take on the paranormal, romance, and developing feminism of the times.

The book begins a bit slow after the prologue, but once Amelia discovers her powers and meets Nathaniel it begins to speed up, often leaving out extra details that might have helped the reader's comprehension. For example, the author is extremely vague in regards to the origination of Amelia's powers, a major aspect of the story. Towards the end surprises appear at every turn of the page, it seemed, improving the excitement and suspense and tying most things together, but soon it felt like these surprises were added last minute and were discordant with the rest of the story.

I found most of the characters intriguing, but I think that Nathaniel could have more depth to him. He's mysterious and intriguing...and that's about it. I liked him, but

there just wasn't much of a story behind him, and he seemed a little too perfect as a love interest. Plus the forbidden romance aspect was a tad predictable. But over that I loved the characters and the things they stood for. Amelia is the innocent, naïve country girl from Broken Tooth, Maine who questions some of the cultures and demands of the city; Zora Stewart and her friends are the revolutionary new generation of independent women, probably the beginning of the feministic change; Nathaniel is the impossible risk and choice that makes Amelia truly question the main culture of the Victorian era.

Overall, the main theme of *The Vespertine* was intriguing and the whole book was very good, with its varying characters, rapidly building suspense, social and cultural questioning, and ultimately the decision to answer to yourself rather than what society demands. It was worth the read and since the ending seemed to be left open for a sequel, I would have to read the next book if Sandra Mitchell came out with one, especially to see if she explains exactly why Amelia has her powers (which *still* bugs me!).

--Macy W