

Runaway Bride

by Fred Gardaphe

June was traditionally the most popular month to hold weddings. Romans believed that those married in the month devoted to Juno, the wife of Jupiter and goddess of marriage, would be married for life. This could be what leads Ryan Toscano, a legal assistant, to pen an essay for a free wedding offered by Brackton, a town in Vermont that seeks to boost tourism by making itself the place for destination weddings through its Brackton is for Brides contest. When Ryan wins, she has only one problem; she has no one to marry. Her fiancé, Jason, had left her a year before to enter a Catholic seminary. With June only six months away what's a girl to do?

The Brackton Chamber of Commerce thinks that, because her name is Ryan, they might have awarded the prize to a gay couple—fitting since Vermont just legalized same-sex marriages. This might be just the angle they need to capture national attention for their efforts. When Ryan's lesbian roommate agrees to travel to Brackton with her to scope out the town and set up the wedding, the chamber thinks they are the couple, that is until Ryan explains the absence of her fiancé and has a brief-but-passionate kiss with Eric, a professional photographer and leading voice in the chamber, that leaves her enchanted and him confused.

There's marriage in the offing, but this feel-good mystery story holds out until the very end before we find out who gets hitched. Along the way, we get take for a literary ride through Ryan's past, her reconnection with Jason, and her own fiction writing. (She's working on a story called "The Holy Prostitute.") Ryan, the daughter of a Jewish mother and Italian-American father, might write herself into strange situations, but her knack for figuring it all out just in time to save face keeps her alive and us turning pages.

Whether it's Fay, the Jewish grandmother who sets her straight on just what marriage means, or Jason, as he tussles with his vocation, the author has us thinking like the characters, who are all plausible in this potentially overly romantic plot. She skirts the dangers of true romance by skewing Ryan's thoughts toward what's good for everyone else but herself. In this way, the novel warrants all of our attention, especially as Ryan works all the angles on her quest to find a husband: grandmother's advice, Internet dating, friend referrals and more.

Even the minor characters matter here; there's Bicycle Girl, who reminds us that some people are connected to no one and everyone, and Hank, the grumpy auto mechanic who's ready to challenge every decision the chamber contemplates. Labozzetta recreates small-town life in ways that show us there's more to tourist traps than meets the eye. After all, these people have to live with each other when they're not busy taking care of the seasonal guests. Through all the fussing and fighting, we get a great look behind the scenes of 21st-century American life at its best and worst.

All ends well, but not in the way you might imagine, and Ryan finds exactly what she needs as her crazy scheme develops into something that changes the way some people will think about marriage and life.

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