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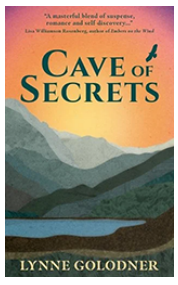

FICTION

Cave of Secrets

Lynne Golodner

Scotia Road Books, 2024
325 pages

Categories
Love & Relationships

Review

By Renita Last – February 3, 2025

Eve Waldman, an American archivist on a fellowship in Scotland, is exploring the hills near Loch Lomond when a sudden storm hits. She finds shelter in a cave, but also finds a trove of long-buried letters written by two Jewish lovers. Her cave discovery opens secrets that will impact families, relationships, and elucidate social and historical norms.

The novel unfolds over two-years and features four alternating narrators: Eve; her father, Sam; Mac Monteith; and his mother, Margaret. Golodner skillfully introduces them and threads their lives and background stories together. Eve, an outspoken, independent young woman, is seriously dedicated to her career. She's been lovingly raised by her single father, but is always aware of his secrets and conscious of the pair's lack of any extended family. Sam, brought up in an ultra-Orthodox family, knew he was gay at an early age. He is forced to marry and adhere to the community's strict rituals. When his wife dies suddenly, he escapes and succeeds in creating a new secular life for himself and his young daughter. Mac Monteith is born into Scottish aristocracy, but prefers to run a pub on the family's estate, eschewing his entitled lifestyle. Though not to the manor born, Margaret is determined to preserve the Monteith family heritage and legacy for her children. She goes to great and questionable lengths to achieve her purpose. As Eve and Mac begin a serious relationship and Sam and Margaret contemplate their choices, secrets, and judgements, all the main characters question and explore their identities and fates.

Central to all these individuals' lives are the two people who wrote the secret love letters. Shira Levenson Macalaster (b.1842) was born into the wealthiest Jewish family in England. They backed the Crown, but were forced from the court due to antisemitism. Shira goes on to marry an aristocratic Scotsman, Hugh Macalaster, Earl of Monteith, with his own sexual secrets. He permits Shira to practice her Judaism surreptitiously. The Levenson Foundation funds Scotland's first Jewish doctor, Benjamin Belzer, in his work with poor Jewish communities. Scotland allowed Jews to attend university at a time when England did not.

Shira and Benjamin engage in a passionate affair and at least one of her children is fathered by Benjamin. When he is lost at sea on a mission, Shira grieves for him for the rest of her life. Macalaster later becomes the British PM. The historical scandalous implications of the affair beset Eve, Mac, and their families.

While Eve doggedly pursues the scenario of the letters, she struggles to keep her work and her love for Mac separate. Will her journey of professional self-discovery come at a personal price?

The author's descriptive imagery beautifully evokes life in the Scottish Highlands as well as the openness of the college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Scottish history, culture, and mores are authentically portrayed. The interesting and intricate work of archivists is clearly detailed and informative.

This engaging, highly readable, and reflective narrative of modern and past romance and mystery covers many timely themes, including homophobia, antisemitism, forbidden love, parent-child relationships, and life choices. There are also some entertaining plot elements of mystical realism in the mix.

The well-drawn characters of *Cave of Secrets* strive to live genuine lives within society and come to terms with their roots and identities.

Renita Last is a member of the Nassau Region of Hadassah's Executive Board. She has coordinated the Film Forum Series for the Region and served as Programming and Health Coordinators and as a member of the Advocacy Committee.

She has volunteered as a docent at the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center of Nassau County teaching the all- important lessons of the Holocaust and tolerance. A retired teacher of the Gifted and Talented, she loves participating in book clubs and writing projects.