

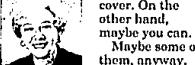
BOOKS

'An Everyday Savior' shows some promise

An Everyday Savior by Kathryn Larrabee (Four Walls Eight Windows, \$24.95).

The novel, written by a former University of Michigan Hopwood Award winner, tells the story of Harley Cookson, a hard-working telephone lineman, recently married to a beautiful Russian immigrant named Sonia.

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VICTORIA DIAZ

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You can't judge a book by its cover. On the other hand, maybe you can.

Maybe some of them, anyway.

Maybe this one.

The cover of *An Everyday Savior* features a blurry image of telephone poles and cables, a blurrier image of trees beneath them, all emerging from a blur of mist. There isn't much color to be found. Gray is the order of the day.

And then it thickens once again when suspicion begins to swirl around Lynette. Was she, indeed, abused? And, if so, did she finally become so outraged by the abuse that she turned on her husband one last time, killing him — or at least, allowing him to die — a particularly dreadful, icy death?

In the novel, written by a former University of Michigan Hopwood Award winner, tells the story of Harley Cookson, a hard-working telephone lineman, recently married to a beautiful Russian immigrant named Sonia.

Harley's 78-year-old mother has broken her leg at the retirement home where she lives and, because she cannot look after herself, is about to be placed in a home for the aged. Consequently, Harley has decided to move her into his own home. Sonia, however, seems to have mixed feelings about the move.

In the meantime, Harley (a guy who seems a little fixated on the past) has a rather disturbing encounter with his high school sweetheart, Lynette. It involves an edgy, lost dog and some evidence that Lynette may be suffering physical abuse at the hands of her husband, Doug.

Doug, a rather vague character who played high school football with Harley.

Sonia seems to have a sixth sense about these things, and is convinced Lynette is being

abused. Not only that, she's convinced that Harley has to do something to stop it. Harley, a rather passive and indecisive guy, has no proof, however, and remains unclear as to what action he could really take.

The plot thickens, though, when he fears that Doug Hale has died — in an apparent ice fishing accident.

And then it thickens once again when suspicion begins to swirl around Lynette. Was she, indeed, abused? And, if so, did she finally become so outraged by the abuse that she turned on her husband one last time, killing him — or at least, allowing him to die — a particularly dreadful, icy death?

On the face of it, this may seem like the stuff of which gripping plots are made. Potential conflict and tension are certainly present, along with a promising dollop of romance, and even a bit of mystery.

Somehow, though, things never quite pan out or come to life.

The book is highly descriptive — so much so that Larrabee's propensity toward detail seems to slow down the momentum of the story, and leaves us to wonder what purpose it serves. Why do we need to know about an old department store that is a tourist attraction in this lakeside community, for instance? And why do we need to be told of the old-fashioned change makers inside its doors?

What is the purpose of providing

ing us with so much information on what these characters wear so much of the time? Why is the behavior of the little lost dog dwelled upon at such length and so frequently? (Really, I think most readers understand why this dog acts as it does rather early on.) So much minutiae not only makes the novel soggy, but gives it a "padded," overlong feel as well.

In addition, Harley's motivations particularly seem vague and hard-to-understand at times and he often comes across as blurry as a ghost. Since he's the leading man here, this confuses things considerably. Sonia's character also seems rather superficially drawn as well, leaving us wanting to know much more about her and her background.

Harley's mother, on the other hand, is not only well-drawn and empathetic, but perhaps the most memorable character in this story.

She's clearly one of those prudish people facing the extraordinary as she approaches the end of her life. Maybe a story centering around her would have been the more powerful story.

Maybe we'll see a story like that in the future. I hope so. In fact, I think most readers would look forward to meeting her once again.

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia resident and writes about books, theater and travel for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Powerfully written book looks at 'Master of the Senate'

The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate (Knopf, 1,167 pages, \$35) by Robert A. Caro.

BY RAY LOCKER
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

If they remember Lyndon B. Johnson at all, most Americans know him as the bigger-than-life president with an accent thicker than east Texas crude and whose liberal social programs got stuck in the quagmire of Vietnam.

Johnson, the 20th century's first Southern president, managed to get that far because he spent the entire 1950s dominating a body of government that no one had truly dominated in 100 years — the United States Senate.

In *Master of the Senate*, Robert A. Caro presents the long-awaited third volume in his epic biography of the life and times of Johnson.

man to read. First, in *The Path to Power*, his patrons were President Franklin D. Roosevelt, two older and lonely men who fell for Johnson's constant fantasy and attention. This time, Johnson's mentor was Sen. Richard Russell, the bachelor senator from Georgia who embraced Johnson and pushed his rise as if it were his own.

Can-do man

"Lyndon Johnson," Richard Russell was to say, "was a can-do young man," Caro writes. "The master legislator, the matchless parliamentarian, knew that there was another master in the Senate now."

Before Caro gets to Russell, he takes us through almost 100 pages on the history of the Senate, detailing the rhetoric battles that preserved the Union in the 1840s and the chamber's descent into a club beholden to Gilded Age plutocrats.

The Senate, Johnson told an aide, was "the right size" for someone whose strength came from one-on-one exchanges.

"The great reader of men," Caro writes, "would have to read only a relatively small number of texts. Furthermore, because of longer senatorial terms, those texts would not be constantly changing as they were in the House. They could be pursued in length, pored over, studied and restudied. He would have ample opportunity not only to read his men, but to make use of what he read in ideal conditions."

Johnson did, and he wasted

little time. Again, Caro shows

that Johnson found the ultimate

body once thought uncontrollable.

Caro shows how Johnson gained Russell's favor, often by taking on chores. Northern Democrats abhorred Johnson's first speech on the Senate floor championed the Southern way of life and stiff-armed civil rights legislation. Later, Johnson maintained the support of Texas' oil millionaires by subduing Federal Power Commissioner Leland Olds' confirmation hearings in a chilling display of attack politics.

A criticism of all the *Path to Power* and *Means of Ascent* was that Caro may have understood Johnson but that he also hated him. *Master of the Senate*, while not a hagiography, shows Johnson in a better light, particularly as he cobbled together the 1957 civil rights bill that finally passed the Senate.

Navigating his way around Northern liberals who wanted the toughest bill possible, a Republican president who wanted to take credit for something and Southern Democrats who wanted no bill at all, Johnson pleaded, cajoled and bargained his way to a victory no one saw coming.

By the end, it mattered little if Johnson actually believed a civil rights bill was good for the nation. It was good for him, Caro writes, and that made it worth doing. In that respect, the Johnson of the first two volumes had changed little, but he worked on a much larger stage.

With another exhaustive, powerfully written book, Caro has again captured the essence of one of our most interesting presidents. It's enough to make readers eager for the final volume and for them to hope they don't have to wait another 12 years to get it.

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