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Once upon a time in Manhattan . . .

. . . there stood a pair of fine old brick townhouses on West Tenth Street. One had a blue door with a tarnished brass knocker in the shape of a dolphin. The other was empty. Behind the blue door lived Sadie, the widow of a famous British rocker who died of an overdose, and two of her children, Hamish and Deen.

The children manage to muddle along as best they can with a loving but distracted mother. But their whole world changes when the house next door gets a new owner—a mysterious Southerner who quickly endears himself to his new neighbors, taking them—and their friends—under his protective wing. In doing so, he transforms everything.

Magical, lively, lovely, and unique, *The Ballad of West Tenth Street* is a contemporary urban fairy tale that delightfully reimagines real life.

The Ballad of West Tenth Street Details

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Author : Marjorie Kernan

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From Reader Review The Ballad of West Tenth Street for online ebook

Caitlin says

Really enjoyed this book- felt somewhat "To Kill a Mockingbird" esque with all the neighborhood camaraderie, even though its set in present-day New York City rather than small-town Alabama.

Admittedly, I was biased since this whole tale is set right in my neighborhood, and it is so fun to envision where it all took place. There are some great moments, like when the young protagonist suggests to his friends "Hey, let's go over to Gray's Papaya. See all the hookers looking tired. They eat six dogs and drink fruit shakes and say really weird things." Or the observation that "for every stack of citizens piled and packed into the buildings of New York there are delis to meet their needs."

There are also some good general insights that aren't necessarily NY-specific. "Sometimes, when things seem to be going too well, one gets a feeling of insidious worry that comes creeping along behind, a shadow that must follow even the best-loved thing. But sometimes, contrary to what might seem tainted by too much luck, things actually do go well."

OR - "oh my dear, one *lives* to buy pretty cakes. I always say, the prettier the cake, the prettier life is."

This is the sort of book that has you laughing out loud while reading it on the subway one minute, and then trying to hide your misty eyes the next. So glad I happened upon it in a small neighborhood bookstore.

Cyd says

Basically a very fine read. It struck me as kind of like The Saturdays and The Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler, only a couple of years later with drugs, booze and swearing. But it's got that same kind of "cozy" middle class life in the middle of the big city feel.

Two things I found distracting. One was that everyone in New York spoke as if they were from Britain. The other was the time line: the technology seemed to suggest that the book is set in "the modern day" but the character of Sadie's birth year is pegged at 1950, which would make her a little too old particularly in relation to the ages of her children BUT this is just distracting and not fatal.

David Peters says

A warm-hearted fable /fantasy centered on the residents of two adjoining houses in the west Village in New York. I was feeling a little nostalgic, and wanted to read the kind of good-hearted, mainstream, middlebrow fiction that I remembered devouring in my dad's collection of Reader's Digest Condensed Books when I was a kid. This volume delivered in that respect. Poignant and heart-warming, with an interesting cast of characters, each of whom is a little bit too good to be true. But an enjoyable read nonetheless.

Jasmine says

I really enjoyed this book, and was a delightful vacation read. If you like lovably wacky characters in a fantasyland version of New York, then you'll like this book. I think it's set in present day, because the teens have cell phones, but other than that I would think that it was set in a long ago (imaginary) version of New York City, where people wander the streets at ease and police officers are all friendly and jolly and people make friends all around them. Alice said that it reminded her of *The Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, and I can see that, but it reminded me a little more of a grown up version of *Harriet the Spy* (and I adore both of those books). Hmm, and maybe a little of *A Little Princess* except set in New York and not London? There isn't really a plot, but that's okay, because I liked being in the world of these characters and seeing what they would do next. It ended poorly, though, it sort of seemed like the author just decided to stop writing, and the only real event in the ending seemed a little gratuitous, and there mostly because there was the need for something to HAPPEN at the end. That, and the periodic foreshadowing of bad things (which felt unnecessary to me and didn't really feel like it meshed with the rest of the book), were my only criticisms.

Brittni says

Kernan's writing reminded me a lot of Harper Lee. A book to get lost in and devour. She has a gift for making you care deeply about her characters and wonder about them long after.

Lily Mulholland says

I picked this novel up at the NYU bookstore on Broadway - having just come up from DC where I'd read two novels by George Pelecanos and enjoyed them more for being in the city where the stories were set, I decided I'd do the same in NYC. There's something to be said for having walked the streets of the main characters - the familiar adds to the unknown and helped me understand Majorie Kernan's novel more than I might have had I read it while sitting at home on the other side of the world.

With a collective cast that settles on a pair of side-by-side houses on West Tenth Street in Manhattan, the author wove a series of stories together that were convincing, affecting and moving. I got a tear or two in my eye as the book swirled its way to its conclusion.

The only thing that grated for me was the depiction of the piano teacher's wife and child. They were truly horrid with no light or shade, no development as to why there were that way. I felt there were a couple of cheap shots taken that were somewhat unnecessary. I also remain perplexed as to inclusions of the caricature of the writer 'George' who inhabits a bar for no apparent reason.

Overall, though, an enjoyable peek into the weird and wonderful lives of a bunch of misfit New Yorkers upon whom the city works its magic to bring them together.

Alice says

I LOVED this book. It's a charming semi-fantasy, semi-serious book about a happy-go-lucky rock widow, her three precocious children, her wacky neighbor the Colonel, and a vast cast of downtown NYC characters. Kernan doesn't take anything too seriously, and there's a strong smell of Tenenbaum about the entire enterprise, with a dash of *Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* crossed with Woody Allen. While I can see why many people would find Sadie, the matriarch, a frustrating character-- she's certainly not responsible, and she's a total drunk-- I found her charming and I enjoyed the amount of agency the children were given. Also liked all the descriptions of furnishings. All in all an extremely fun read and one I am going to try to get my book club to tackle next.

Lindsay says

This book definitely has a hint of fantasy to it....a bit fable-like, if you will. It's very heartwarming and entertaining, and I had trouble putting it down any time I tried. I loved how put-together the children were in this book, and how it made me really almost fall in love with a bum of NYC - the central characters are definitely not of "the norm." I only have one complaint about this book though - most of it was really great, however the end didn't quite satisfy me. I don't really feel as if things were wrapped up as I would have hoped. When I turned the page only to see that there was no more left, I was shocked. I wish we had been given a tiny bit more to go on at the conclusion. Definitely not enough to deter future readers though - I would highly recommend this one for a fun, suck-you-in read!!

Deb says

A very different type of book. The Hollander family consists of Sadie, the widow of a rock star, and her 3 children, Gretchen, Ondine, and Hamish, and they live in a fading brownstone in NYC. Sadie depends on vodka to get her through the day, Gretchen is in a "loonybin", Ondine is a budding concert pianist, and Hamish is a gangly growing adolescent. The story has the quality of a fairy tale: a rich eccentric moves next door and plays fairy godfather to the struggling family, a homeless Vietnam vet, a non-union plumber/handyman, a Guatemalan housekeeper, and an interior decorator. At times I was tempted to abandon the book, but something about the story kept tugging, and I'm glad I stuck with it.

Grace says

trite. very few dear moments, but they do exist. dialogue and inner monologue was all but unbelievable. the cliched motley crew of eccentrics play out in my head like the overdramatic and self-indulgent community theater actors. that and the parodic rock and pop stars from get him to the greek. the good characters were very good, and the villains were very bad, and their intentions were shoved relentlessly in the reader's face. flat and with zero complexity. but i finished it. so that's something, i guess.

Natalie Tyler says

I vaguely and mildly wanted to like this book more than I did. It's a different sort of book---it's not strictly realism or magic realism and it's not post-modern (thankfully). It's got many fable-like qualities. There are not too many characters and yet somehow it did not come to life for me. Perhaps the precocity of the children combined with a certain idealized gentle madness made it all seem too much of a fantasy.

This novel could be deeply compelling and lovely for adolescent readers. I would give it to a bright 12 year old.

Catherine says

I didn't really like this book, however I was compelled to finish it. I was irked by the idealized life the author had in mind for her characters, who almost exclusively fell under the categories of "really good" or "really bad" despite the written in character flaws. No motives were mysterious, ever. What a nice and privileged world to imagine growing up in, but, as it turns out, a less interesting world to read about.

Kari says

I've been struggling to write a review for Marjorie Kernan's *The Ballad of West Tenth Street*. I keep thinking that I will be inspired, that something will come to me, the longer I wait to write this. But three days after finishing it and I still can't think of what to say. I liked it. But now I have to figure out why.

I'll start with a synopsis. A West Village brownstone is occupied by the Hollander family. Sadie, the mother, is the widow of a rock star, has a bit of a drinking problem, but is also really close to her children. The children are three: Gretchen, Deen, and Hamish. Gretchen is twenty-one and the only one of the children that is old enough to have had a relationship with their dead father, Ree. She's a pro on the drums but has quit playing, stopped talking, and, after a self-cutting spree, has landed herself upstate in a looney bin. Deen is fourteen and on her way to becoming a classical pianist. Hamish is eleven and on his way to becoming a gourmet chef (or at least a good enough cook to feed the family).

There are many interesting characters outside of the Hollander family that make this a "contemporary fairy tale": uncle Brian, Ree's ex-band-mate that has lusted over Sadie for a dozen or so years; a rich Southerner called the Colonel that moved in next door; the Colonel's Guatemalan housekeeper and his resourceful decorator; a non-union handyman; an eccentric musical genius; and Cap'n Meat, a bum that keeps a pet cat and has befriended the children.

So how is this book an "urban fairy tale" you may ask? Excellent question. The characters are divided into two groups: good and bad. Every subplot has a villain, and we find ourselves supporting the good guys no matter what. So Sadie drinks too much...we still like her better than that godawful wife of Deen's piano teacher. Kernan paints New York as a magical place, one in which a couple of kids can befriend a bum that hangs out in their neighborhood; a rich old man can build said bum his own cabin in the garden so he won't be living on the streets; cops will give bums food and water instead of trouble. And of course, good always prevails over evil in the end. It's kinda like some of those other contemporary-fairy-tale children's books like *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, plus drugs and booze and profanity.

I felt like I got to know the characters enough to really care about them, but once I finished the book, I realized I didn't really know all that much about them. How were these characters defined by their qualities and experiences? They end up seeming kind of one-dimensional and you want to know what they think and feel. The story feels concluded once you finish the last page, but then you think about it and you start wanting to know more. How did things turn out?

But of course, this is all after the fact, anyway. Once you start reading, you're drawn into the world of the Hollanders and none of these musings matter.

Susan Gloss says

A friend from my writing group (and the fastest reader I know) recommended this book to me. Marjorie Kernan's *The Ballad of West Tenth Street* revolves around two Greenwich Village brownstones and their eccentric inhabitants. In one of the houses lives Sadie Hollander, the tipsy widow of a British rock star, and her adolescent children, Deen and Hamish. Her oldest child, Gretchen, lives away from home in a mental hospital. She was the only child who truly knew her father before he died of a heroin overdose.

In the brownstone next door resides a genteel Southerner referred to as "the Colonel." He, like the fatherless Hollander children, is lonely and spends a lot of time lost in his own thoughts. He takes an interest in Deen and Hamish, inviting them to come over to play his grand piano, eat snacks prepared by his housekeeper, and wander around in his garden.

Contrasting with the world of the stately brownstones is the street world of Cap'n Meat, a homeless Vietnam veteran, and his cat, Titus. From his park bench, Cap'n Meat keeps an eye on Deen and Hamish, who are allowed to wander the streets of the Village at their whim.

When Sadie Hollander is called away to the UK to attend to an injured bandmate of her late husband, she makes hasty arrangements for Hamish to stay at the home of a family friend. Deen is left to stay with her bohemian piano teacher and his deranged wife. Aware that the children are unhappy with their temporary placements, the Colonel takes it upon himself to check in on them frequently. He, his housekeepers, and Cap'n Meat form an unlikely and eclectic pseudo-family for the Hollander children while their mother is away.

What I loved most about this book was the unique storytelling technique used by its author. Marjorie Kernan is a visual artist, which is apparent in the way she describes the Manhattan streets in unexpected detail, making the Hollanders' neighborhood seem enchanted and home-like in some scenes and cold and menacing in others. Kernan also tells the story from varying perspectives. She breaks the usual rules about point of view, jumping from one character's thoughts to another. One moment we may be privy to Deen's or the Colonel's inner musings. The next paragraph might be told from the perspective of a mouse living in the Hollanders' floorboards. This "head hopping" could be confusing in the hands of a less skillful writer, but Kernan manages to pull it off. The result is that the novel displays a rich, heartbreak, and ultimately hopeful texture that it would not otherwise have.

Kelly says

I'm fine with a book being bad or pointless as long as I can figure that out early on and stop reading it. The Ballad of West Tenth Street is the worst kind of book, because it strings the reader along, letting him or her enjoy reading it, only to slowly start falling apart before ending in disappointment and exasperation. Even as I got more and more annoyed, I kept reading because I thought the author might do something wonderful with it. That was not the case. The book summary describes it as "a contemporary urban fairy tale that delightfully reimagines real life." My problem with it is that the book didn't clearly pick a side; it was realistic enough that I was constantly annoyed by how unrealistic it was.

My number one annoyance was how much tea everyone was constantly drinking, including formal tea in the afternoon with cute sandwiches. The novel was set in New York, in America. It needed more coffee. Other things that annoyed me...Two of the characters were homeless men, but I got the feeling that the author had never before interacted with a homeless person. The children acted like adults and the adults acted like children. Everyone seemed to speak with the same British voice, but again, they were almost all supposedly New Yorkers. There was a baby that everyone hated - why? How can you hate a baby for doing baby things? In a "suspensful" scene, a fourteen year old girl is desperate to make a phone call and is panicking because she doesn't have any quarters. The book was written in 2009; I doubt any 14 year old knows what a pay phone even is. The simple solution is to ask anyone -anyone- on the street to borrow their cell phone for thirty seconds. And finally, the book contained the worst simile ever (regarding the hated baby): "It fought off the putting on of mittens and booties like a virgin fighting off a rapist."

I could have forgiven all of that (excluding the simile) if the book had been about four times as long and had gone into more detail with the characters. That would have given it time to have an actual ending instead of just abruptly stopping. I wish someone would have sent the author back to keep working on it instead of publishing it, because it had potential.
