

Christine Sunderland's *The Fire Trail* (eLectio Publishing, 2016)

Reviewed by novelist Susan Prudhomme

Christine Sunderland's *The Fire Trail* is one part suspenseful murder mystery and one part passionate plea for social sanity in the face of a society disintegrating around us. Jessica Thierry, a doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley, is struggling to overcome the downward drag of a family fragmented through the loss of her father and the depredations of drug abuse on her sisters. Fearful of falling into the same pattern, Jessica fashions for herself a program of rigidly held moral values: "discipline, self-control, and delayed gratification." Thus armed, she requires herself to postpone forming any deep relationships and focus entirely on her doctoral research. Her chosen field is history, particularly the story of an order of nuns, the Sisters of the Presentation, who made important contributions to the well-being of the Berkeley area during its early years.

Jessica's advisor compliments her for bravery on doing "real history," rather than viewing her subject "through a lens of "class warfare, indigenous peoples, race or gender issues, or America's imperialism." She does not "polemicize facts to fit a social narrative." She replies that she believes "history helps us create a philosophic structure with which to understand our world. Without history or a philosophic construct based on history, we choose to understand our world through pop culture – raunchy and violent movies, primitive music, coarse language." Given her own emotional traumas, it is clear Jessica, like the many readers who will find this book expressing their own quest, is reaching out for truth over ideology to find a firm foundation for her own understanding of the world and her place in it.

This already wounded Jessica hikes the Fire Trail alone one evening and runs smack into a crazed rapist who has just murdered a coed. They stare into each other's eyes for a moment before he runs off, leaving the girl's body for Jessica to find. But she has seen the man's face. How long before he searches her out and comes after her? Her roommate is out of town; Jessica is living alone in their ground-floor flat. The suspense begins to build.

Trying to stay focused on her work, Jessica finds a part-time job as a docent at a local museum, Comerford House, where she can also study primary sources for her doctoral thesis on her subject, the Sisters of the Presentation. There she meets the directress, Anna Aguilar, herself wounded by a husband who left her for another woman, and her son Zachary, a doctoral candidate in English Literature. In a cottage and chapel behind the main house live Father Nate and his invalid brother, Nicholas, a famous scholar who has written extensively on the decline of Western Civilization. These people become an island of sanity for each other against the violence, corruption, secularization, and moral decline of our society, and offer Jessica friendship and comfort for her constant fear that the rapist will find and attack her.

The tension grows as the police investigation crawls in frustrating slowness, and, despite chilling evidence that the rapist knows where she lives, Jessica turns down the offer of a safer shelter. Meanwhile, Jessica's friendship and budding romance with Zachary is threatened, both by misunderstandings and by Jessica's fear of trusting him. Nevertheless, the two together solve a secondary puzzle, a mysterious key found by Fr. Nate. One can see the hand of God at work as this second solution provides the means of Jessica's survival in the final, terrifying confrontation with the rapist/murderer.

The suspenseful tale of murder and fear make a ready vehicle for Mrs. Sunderland's lively discussions of social dissolution and its causes, as well as Berkeley's history. I especially enjoyed some of the images – Fr. Nate's disfigured face representing the disfigurement of the Church through secularist propaganda; his scholar brother's ALS representing the cultural ignorance gradually suffocating Western civilization. The picture she paints is a disturbing one, and leaves the reader hoping that like Jessica and Zachary, through the grace of God, our society will find its happy ending.

SUSAN PRUDHOMME is a Bay Area writer. She is author of the highly acclaimed novels, *The Wisdom of Ambrose*, *The Forest*, and *The Desert*, all published by OakTara.