

Allegedly – Tiffany D. Jackson

Allegedly is the first person narrative of Mary Addison, a 16 year old girl serving a sentence for the manslaughter of a three month old baby left in the care of her (and her mother) when she was only nine years old. As we learn about Mary's world through her eyes – meeting the other girls living in the group home, the adults charged with their care, her mother and her boyfriend – it is easy to feel sympathy for this vulnerable young woman as she deals with the indignity, neglect and danger that comes with growing up in 'baby jail' and then a group home. Any reader will be on the side of the clever and determined young woman as she struggles to prepare for a future beyond the group home. Her unplanned pregnancy provides a great sense of urgency as she navigates the home and the outside world. She knows that if she wants any chance of being a mother to her baby, she will need to tell the truth of what happened that fateful night when she was nine years old.

The truth of those events and her childhood years are obscured from the reader and slowly revealed through excerpts of analysis and interviews published in books about the high profile case. That mystery, combined with the many forces working against Mary's self-education, make the book a page-turning suspense novel. It doesn't take many pages to become immersed in Mary's world and the book is fast-paced and gripping. I read it all in one day. We get to know Mary well and some of the key external characters are also drawn with complexity, although some remain more two-dimensional. While much of the subject matter is quite grim, there are important moments of kindness and generosity all the more deeply felt because of Mary's difficult circumstances and her drive to improve them.

The book came to a rather shocking end that, on reflection, should not have been entirely unexpected, as the author had been laying clues throughout the book. Still, the ending certainly cast a very different light on all that had preceded it, making an already challenging story that more difficult to swallow. Having raced through the book hoping for certain endings, I felt somewhat betrayed by the finale and wished for days that it could have ended differently. Kudos to Ms. Jackson for creating a character as complex and likeable as Mary through which to explore some of the issues surrounding the punishment and detention of youth, while also writing a book that I continued thinking and puzzling over for days after completing it.

Finally, a quote relevant to the mission of Liberation Library: "The joke of a bookshelf downstairs has the same crap they had in baby jail I've inhaled three times over and I'd kill for something – anything – new to read."