



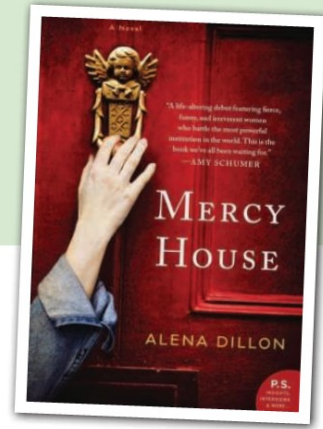
MERCY HOUSE

by Alena Dillon

WILLIAM MORROW, 350 PAGES, \$16.99 US

REVIEWED BY LINDA FASULO

BOOK REVIEW



Intro:

This month, I'm excited to feature a debut novel from a very talented writer, Alena Dillon. The book, titled *Mercy House*, was named as a LibraryReads and Amazon Book of the Month for February 2020. Previous works by the author have appeared in various publications, including *LitHub*, *River Teeth*, *Slice Magazine*, *Bustle* and *The Smart Set*. Dillon teaches creative writing at Endicott College and St. Joseph's College and lives on Boston's North Shore with her husband and newborn son.



Tucked away on a quiet street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York stands an unobtrusive old row house. Its only claim to ostentatiousness being a gold angel doorknocker. No signs proclaim its purpose or the names of those who reside there. Yet it is a place of caring, a safe haven for women who are victims of domestic violence and rape. Founded 20 years earlier and overseen by three sisters, Sister Evelyn, Sister Josephine and Sister Maria, nuns of the order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Mercy, it is aptly named *Mercy House*. It is here that battered and broken women can find mercy, rediscover their self-esteem and learn how to love and forgive.

Sister Evelyn is a 70-year-old nun with a tough exterior and a caring heart. Sister Maria, a bit of a rebel, serves as Mercy House's cook and its resident Reiki master. Sister Josephine, with her Doctorate Degrees in Nursing, Philosophy and Religion, is the educator and psychologist of the group. And while their methods at *Mercy House* may lie a bit outside of church doctrine, their success rate with those who grace their doors is nothing short of phenomenal.

There are five bedrooms within *Mercy House*, excluding those that the Sisters themselves share, and they're nearly always filled. Over the years, hundreds of women have been helped through their program and while there is the occasional failure, most of those who have called *Mercy House* home have gone on to lead productive, fulfilling lives. Straight or gay, seeking divorce or

abortion, the sisters have been there to provide love and support. Shave 'em and save 'em is not how it works at *Mercy House*, but rather unconditional love and acceptance, along with a healthy dose of common sense and caring.

Not much throws Sister Evelyn. She's basically seen it all. Yet when she receives word that Bishop Robert Hawkins is being sent to investigate *Mercy House* and its practices, she is terrified. For the nuns efforts to help those in their charge have occasionally deviated from Church Doctrine into areas forbidden by the Church. And Evelyn has her own secrets...secrets dark enough to threaten all she has done at *Mercy House*. Can *Mercy House* survive the self-righteousness of this Bishop, who had crossed Evelyn's path years ago and nearly been her undoing, or will her indomitable spirit win out. At 70, she and her fellow sisters are simply too old to start over, and how could she survive were she to be excommunicated from the only life she's ever known.

Though *Mercy House* is somewhat different from previous novels I've featured, it is most assuredly relevant and an excellent read. It is, in essence, the story of a group of women who band together in support of one another no matter the cost. It is also a novel of love and caring against seemingly insurmountable odds. Beautifully crafted, *Mercy House* is a novel that is well worth reading and one that will stay with the reader long after the final page is turned.

NOTE: For anyone experiencing domestic violence in any of its many forms, help is available in the greater Naples area 24 hours a day/7 days a week. All you need do is call 239.775.1101 or 800.962.2873 (toll free). For TTY/TTD, 239.775.4265. The Shelter for Abused Women and Children in Naples is a safe place for you, your children, and your pets.