



The Ballad of West Tenth Street

By Marjorie Kernan
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Introduction

Once upon a time in Manhattan . . .

. . . there stood on West Tenth Street a pair of fine old brick townhouses. 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 their 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 re-imagines real life.

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Ballad of West Tenth Street* has been described as an urban fairy tale. What elements of the story and characters do you see as having parallels in traditional fairy tales?
2. Describe what you see to be the dynamics of the Hollander family. Do you think that Sadie would still drink as much if she hadn't lost Ree?
3. How do you feel the environment of New York City interplays and affects the characters and their actions? Do you think the house is a refuge from the city or is it in fact a microcosm of the city? How so?
4. What do you think motivates the Angry One to fixate on Cap'n Meat and his cat? What fuels his rage?
5. The novel contains a series of small vignettes of the Village. Did you find that they added to the general narrative? It also goes off on odd tangents, such as the life of the mouse that lives under the dishwasher and the thoughts of a carved cow. Did these add an element of fantasy or whimsicality?
6. What do you think is the significance of the drawing that Gretchen keeps repeating?
7. Many might call certain characters in the novel stereotypes, such as the kindly old Southern gentleman, or Ette, the cook with the heart of gold. Do you agree? If not, why?
8. Have you ever encountered an infant as horrid as Rinaldo? If so, describe your experience.
9. In the opening and closing scenes of the novel, the author employs a rather antiquated method of inviting the actual reader to see the scene with her. Did you find that this approach helped to effectively frame the narrative? Why or why not?
10. Did the novel end the way you expected? Why or why not?

About the Author

Marjorie Kernan, a former painter, owns an antique shop on the coast of Maine. This is her first novel.