



## **Mystical Circles**

*S.C. Skillman*

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“Hi, you in crowded stressed old London from me in the peaceful perfect Cotswolds. Massive change of plan. I’m in love. Craig's gorgeous, sexy, intelligent. Paradise here. Staying forever.”

Juliet, concerned that her younger sister has fallen for the charismatic Craig, leader of the Wheel of Love, sets off for the Cotswolds to investigate the mystery.

She arrives at Craig’s community hoping to rescue Zoe. But romance, mystery & suspense await her as intrigues, liaisons & relationships flare, flourish or fizzle out quickly in this close circle of men & women; & despite her reservations Juliet is drawn into the Wheel of Love – with completely unforeseen consequences.

## **Mystical Circles Details**

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Author : S.C. Skillman

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## From Reader Review *Mystical Circles* for online ebook

### Rachel says

I was lucky to win this book on a Goodreads giveaway.

As other people have mentioned I found the book quite slow up until about half way through. Although I did quite like the character building and story setting.

The complex characters at the retreat are just the kind of people I imagined to be at the kind of place and I quite like the dynamics of the group.

One thing that I was a but disappointed with was regarding Don (and presumably Craig) being from Barnsley. I am a Barnsley girl and believe me Don definitely didn't come across as a typical Barnsley chap, businessman or not-maybe it was just the language used by Don, I didn't know but it didn't sit right with me-again that's probably just down to me actually being from Barnsley and it's personal to me.

I only awarded 3 stars as I felt there just wasn't enough excitement in the story-even when there was supposed to be (a priest writing a book he thought his Bishop would disagree with, the reason Craig and Don were at loggerheads. Etc) I just think I expected more from the ending after all the build up! It was an OK read but I don't think I'll be reading it again.

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### Lance Greenfield says

The story is based around Juliet who is obsessed about her mission to rescue her sister, Zoe, from Craig and his diverse community in the South West of England. Zoe has fallen under the spell of Craig and is unlikely to be persuaded by anything that Juliet can uncover in her investigative journalism role, or anything that Juliet can tell her.

There is certainly a wide variety of characters in the community, and their backgrounds and interactions are built splendidly all the way through the book. Indded, there are new revelations right up to the conclusion. One struggles to decide which of the charcaters is sane, of any, but this is a deliberate ploy of the author, and it adds a great level of interest to the story, which I really enjoyed.

There are two reasons that this book did not make it to four stars in my eyes.

The first is that it takes so long for the story to wind up to a decent pace. In fact, I would say that it is slow going up to about half way through.

The second is the number of irritating pauses in conversations. Sheila Skillman really overcooks this. "Several moments passed," or variations on that theme, become the author's repetitive and annoying cliché. If I had an electronic copy of the book, I would do a search and count on the word "moment," and I wouldn't be at all surprised if it turned out to appear at a frequency of more than one per page.

That thought raises a question that has been on my mind for many years. Just how long a moment is in absolute units of time? So often, I have been asked by a shop assistant or telephone operator to wait "just a moment."

How long do I have to wait?!

Despite this momentary quirk, I really liked the story and found it to be very interesting and captivating. I would certainly recommend it to my friends.

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### **Philip S Davies says**

Some friends recommended this to me, and I'm so glad I finally got around to reading it. The scene is an idyllic Cotswold farmhouse, where a mixed bag of needy people live in a community. Enter journalist Juliet, seeking to save her younger sister from the clutches of what she considers a cult, with its charismatic and enigmatic leader, Craig. Like Juliet, we are drawn into the claustrophobic lives of the characters in this "Wheel of Love" and find ourselves unable to leave. As the emotional and psychological tensions crackle and ignite against each other, it's like watching a slow-motion train crash of the conflicting personalities, desires, jealousies and hurts. If you like your drama filled with psychological suspense, with a hint of the paranormal, then you won't be disappointed. I'm pleased to see there's a sequel, "A Passionate Spirit". Well done, S.C. Skillman.

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### **Jasmine says**

I didn't actually read it all (only 84 pages) but it was quite dull and not written very well :( I think the plot sounds good but all the characters were a bit confusing and the storyline slow.

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### **Nicola McDonagh says**

Slow-moving mystery/suspense

The story begins with a mysterious letter from Zoe, the heroine's sister, inviting Juliet to stay in a Cotswold farmhouse with a group of people known as 'Wheel of Love'. Once there she will meet her sister's enigmatic new boyfriend. Right from the start the reader knows that something is not right. There is a lovely feel of mystery in this book and SC Skillman does a great job of setting the scene for Juliet to stumble into something weird. I was engaged by the mysterious beginning and intrigued to discover what was going to happen to our apprehensive heroine.

Clues are laid for the reader to pick up on throughout. The champagne cork and empty bottle on the gravel driveway; the meeting with the silver haired man who may or may not be Craig, her sister Zoe's new fling. Lots of questions are initially raised to amplify the atmosphere of unease:

"Craig will reach deep down into your spirit and touch a part of it you never knew was there."

She closed the brochure. Creepy. She didn't need him to reach down into her spirit, or provide her with tools to enter heaven. Nor did she trust the word freedom, until she knew how he defined it. How did Zoe get caught up in this?"

There was some nice revealing of characters both physical and internal through description and believable conversations. Juliet is a journalist and is keen to find out more about this group and of course, her sister's new beau. There are lots of references to British culture, which places the action neatly in England without going into long drawn out explanations, which gains a big tick from me.

I enjoyed the detailed descriptions of the old house Juliet goes to. With its oak beams, low ceilings and wainscoting. I liked the references to its occult/pagan past; corn dollies on the wall and stuff like that, gave it a Wicker Man kind of feel. When Juliet finally meets her sister, we see that Zoe, is utterly caught up in the cult way of life, and Juliet is obviously concerned. I thought it was a good idea to have the main character as a journalist, this way the author can show how she uncovers the truth and learns the reality of this seemingly wonderful and spiritual group.

Juliet meets a host of 'enlightened' characters that offer her the chance to become one of them and gain ultimate fulfilment, she is doubtful and like her; I couldn't wait to meet the enigmatic Craig. We are left with people telling Juliet about him, which heighten the mystery and drama. SC is quite skilful in keeping up tension and mystery, so drawing the reader in.

However, because there are quite a few characters, I felt that they became a little samey, except for the sinister parrot, Groucho – I liked him. Craig is described well and comes across as manipulative and scary. He has special Shaman powers and that gives him superiority over the others. This overall feel of creepiness is maintained – again Juliet's character is reminiscent of the policeman in the Wicker Man. Juliet becomes more and more dubious about the merits of the group and the credibility of Craig as its leader. As the story progresses, Juliet's apprehension is justified, however, she becomes lulled by their support and concern for her and she starts to be drawn into their sinister world, warming towards the attention that Craig bestows upon her.

I did want the pace to pick up a bit and found myself skipping a few sentences here and there just to see if the action would kick in. We gain the same information about Craig and his group from several different people; I don't think it was all that necessary to have so many scenes based around eating. Sometimes the point was laboured too much. We know – because we are constantly being told – that Craig is manipulative and has powers over people. I thought it was overdone with too many scenes of folk 'coming out' and being 'healed' by Craig. The author could maybe edit, some scenes and lose a few of the rather samey revelations in order to bring some pace to a story that flags somewhat in the middle.

The narrative as a whole was dialogue heavy, which made it feel like a radio play at times. Not a criticism as such, I just felt that there could have been more actual prose with a little more action on occasions, to cut into the long passages of exposition brought to us via conversation. Some of the dialogue went on for too long, the introductions at dinner being an example of this. I wanted the pace to pick up a bit after Juliet meets Craig, but there was yet another chapter of people talking about themselves, rather than the reader seeing them react to events that occur around them. There are lots of spoken confessions and too few actual scenes of action showing people living what they describe.

I got a bit fed up towards the end. Too much foreshadowing and not enough actual action left me wanting to skip yet another mealtime disclosure. I wanted the author to cut to the chase and get on with it. The ending proved to be a little bit contrived, employing lots of exposition and detective/Cluedo-style revelations. And amongst it all, the inevitable love triangle and disappointingly, an all too happy ending that negated the promise of the earlier mystery and suspense. Still on the whole a good read that could benefit from cutting back a little.

It won't disappoint lovers of romance and thriller as it has lots of both throughout.

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## **Fox says**

I won this book through the Good Reads first reads program.

Mystical Circles tells the story of Juliet, who's sister Zoe has fallen for a man named Craig. This would be wonderful, were it not for the fact that Craig is the leader of a New Age community called Mystical Circles. He's a modern day guru preaching a renewed version of Don Juan's idea that we drop our old self in order to become a new one. Forget our past, embrace the future... etc. So, Juliet goes to the cult in the Cotswolds to do a documentary about the movement. Also, to collect Zoe. But oh, there are dark secrets...

Dark secrets in a New Age Movement? Violence, intrigue, fallen priests, and tortured artists. A confused romance? Thwarted investigations? Oh, all of this is right up my alley and I was very excited to read it. Unfortunately, the love story kind of ruined it for me. I felt that the feelings for Craig were unnatural, Craig not really inviting the feelings he should have. Likewise, Don didn't seem to radiate any attraction and that all seemed rather forced to me.

The writing meandered a little. Beautiful, beautiful scenery. Realistic enough characters. I just wanted more of it to feel natural, a bit more rhythmical. The emotions, again, seemed to get in the way of the action for me. A revision of the book could make it truly grand, but for now, it just didn't really do it for me. I wanted a bit more of the book. Still, it did engage me. It did get me reading, and hold my interest. It did make me think about it a bit. I just came up a bit bored, when I wanted my heart and mind to be racing.

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## **L.A. says**

Article first published as Book Review:Mystical Circles by S.C. Skillman on Blogcritics.

When Juliet Blake receives an email from her sister Zoe proclaiming a new love and her intention of joining his New Age cult in the Cotswolds' she is panicked. She does not believe Zoe knows what is best for her and as her older sister; it is in Juliet's best interest to rescue her. Julie uses her work as a freelance investigative journalist to worm her way into asking questions.

What she finds when she reaches the ranch is anything but normal, and as she delves in she meets and oddly charismatic and dysfunctional group of people. Besides the unusual characters a type of bedlam seems to exist, a kind of do anything attitude. The leader Craig is nothing like she imagined and she is drawn to him in an unexplainable way. Craig's father Don is also present at the ranch, hoping to help his son salvage his commune. Due to the nature of the problems of those living in the commune, the ranch is close to bankruptcy.

There are strange things happening in the commune, and when a priest shows up it further traumatizes the group. Each of them has an unusual reason for being here, and there appears to be no real rules. When one of the attendees begins to lose control and attacks others, Juliet expects police involvement. When this does not occur, she is incredulous, and yet finds herself going along with the reasoning. When attacked herself, she no longer believes the cause. What is happening and why? This loving and freedom-believing cult while wonderful on the surface is a cauldron of deceit and depravity on the inside. Can she help to find the problems? Is Craig the wonderful guy she thinks, and what is it about his father that seems to now attract her?

In *Mystical Circles*, S.C. Skillman introduces you to an eclectic and slightly damaged group of characters. Skillman does a great job of portraying the damaged psyche in most cases and you can visualize the characters to a great degree. Many of the flaws are quite harmless and you find yourself drawn to the individuals, hoping the unusual treatment will be the answer, the redeeming feature for them to be able to gain normalcy. Yet there are those others, just severe enough that keep the tension high and keep the group on edge.

Don seems to be the only normal person there, and Juliet finds him to be a great sounding board through the times she spends with them. His relationship with his son however is anything but normal. She is constantly asked to take sides, yet she remains neutral. She is here for a story, and yet she does find herself pulled in to the strangeness.

Juliet on the surface seems to be very sharp and begins her investigation with thought and care. And yet she consistently says the wrong thing setting off different chain reactions that reverberate throughout the commune. She is a catalyst for many of the choices and often seems to put her foot in her mouth when trying to get information from the different members. Her strength seems to change towards the end when she struggles with her own attractions. She seems to lose that edge and her boundaries appear to blur.

Can she help to save this commune, or is it just another mistake, a place for people to hide from real-life with no redeeming qualities. Can she leave after all she has witnessed?

This is an unusual read, one with an interesting cast of characters, and a string of unusual happenings. It moves along at a quick pace, and keeps you interested in what may occur next. This is not your usual thriller and yet it keeps you in suspense. It is more of a mystery of the workings of a disparate group of people. It deals with how relationships are formed and how the smallest of happenings can shatter lives.

Skillman is a deft hand at creating characters. If you are interested in people and their foibles, you will enjoy this book.

This book was received as a free book from the author. All opinions are my own based off my reading and understanding of the material.

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### **Andi Houtsch says**

Telling the story of Juliet, a freelance reporter hoping to sell a documentary about the Wheel of Love, an obscure sect of people living in the Cotswolds Hills of Great Britain, as well as potentially save her younger sister Zoe, the newest member from falling into the clutches of the man who leads this group, *Mystical Circles* at once both delivers and confounds.

*Mystical Circles* was an intriguing read. Skillman has a keen eye and understanding of the dynamics that push and pull people apart as well as the psychology behind those dynamics. The insight is so keen and the writing so well-done that unfortunately the characters in the book are compelling while being frustratingly obscure. Skillman delivers details about the crew living and functioning at the Wheel of Love with just enough love and finesse to paint a constant yearning to know infinitely more about each person occupying a place within this retreat from the world. While unable to fully know each character I found this obscurity to be quite true to life in actually getting to know someone. How much do we really ever get to know someone? As Craig, the leader of The Wheel of Love (and an incredibly intense Idealist entrenched in his own ideals to

the exclusion of the outside world and in direct contrast to his teachings to his people), makes it a point to tell Juliet: “Nothing here is what it seems to be.” We are never quite who we seem to be and this novel explores the gamut of ways a person’s ego – born of fear – can color both perceptions of self as well as how others see us.

There is a point in which a character, by the name of Al (an American living in the UK by choice), makes a comment about “Brits and their subtlety”. This may be the most apt comment to describe this book. Skillman weaves a tale that tugs you along regardless of how unwilling you might be to follow the lead, often wondering just what’s around the bend for these characters. The love story element for Juliet is so low-key that it often becomes lost in the turbulence between the other characters. Because of this I couldn’t tell if this was supposed to be a romance, a psychological exploration of the mindsets and ego-trips that send people fleeing the realities of every day life, or some new approach to enlightening the world to what are a great many profound spiritual concepts through often infuriatingly slow-paced revelations.

Truthfully what drew me in to the reading was a personal connection with Juliet, being the elder sister who worries about her younger sister in taking up with Craig and this band of misfit characters all belonging to the Wheel of Love. Having had a similar experience in seeing my younger sister take up with a religious group whose tenets I understood only peripherally, I too went to visit and stay a few days with her (although this was in the beautiful Finger Lakes region of upstate New York as opposed to the picturesque and ancient Cotswolds) to try and gain better understanding if not try and bring her away from such cultural, religious differences. Juliet’s experience with the Wheel of Love differed immensely from my experience but I could understand and relate to her struggle with accepting Craig’s teachings without quite understanding them or the overt willingness to freely join in. While Zoe, Juliet’s sister, eventually reaches an emotional and spiritual destination previously unexpected and with another man entirely, much without the aid (or hindrance, as it may be) of Juliet, so too does Juliet, finding love in the most unexpected of places and in the person she most denies evokes such a deep response in her. Her experience with the Wheel of Love changes her, although to the better is left up to the reader.

I too connected with Craig with his intense idealism and loved watching his struggle to put his teachings (of the most abstract kind – freeing ourselves from the burdens of our pasts to live in and accept the “here and now”) into practical use for himself. These are struggles I easily relate to also in being intensely idealistic and understanding abstract concepts the likes of which are explored in this book. Watching him through Juliet’s eyes brought about quite a few moments of self-reflection, as in “is this how I appear to others and if so am I just as difficult and frustrating to nail down?”

The reading of *Mystical Circles* left me with mixed feelings although none too far to the negative that I would not recommend this book to someone looking for a thought-provoking interlude. Having finished the reading days before writing this review I am still puzzling and mulling over the cast of characters, complete with their many flaws and eventual personal resolutions, which Skillman brings to the page. Filled with keen insights into human psychology and built upon the subtle foundations of spiritual insights that we all want to intellectualize and glorify for it, *Mystical Circles* was, for the most part, an enjoyable read, thereby netting it a rating of 4 out of 5 stars.

I deducted only one star from the full 10 rating only due to the slow-pacing and somewhat convoluted plot. There isn’t just one theme that stands out in this book and while I love a tale woven with subtlety and complexity there were simply too many layers to this story for it to be a stand out on any singularity. Skillman’s attention to the editing and appearance was spot on. I found few, if any, editing misses that detracted from the reading. While well-written *Mystical Circles* just couldn’t achieve a maximum rating for me based on all the aforementioned reasons.



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## **Paul Trembling says**

This story revolves around Juliet, a reporter visiting a spiritual retreat centre to get material for a radio documentary. But she has a hidden agenda. Her real concern is for her sister Zoe, who has joined the centre and fallen in love with its charismatic leader, Craig. Juliet intends to rescue her, whether she wants to be rescued or not.

But Juliet begins to discover that there are a lot of other hidden agendas in operation. In contrast to the peaceful rural setting, the varied group of people she meets are a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. The 'Mystical Circles' of the title are, in fact, circles within circles - and in the confines of a small community, those circles often overlap. The results are sometimes spectacular, and sometimes dangerous.

Juliet's arrival and her probing questions are a catalyst, setting in train a release of emotions and a clash of personalities which will bring the entire future of the community into question.

The author shows considerable skill in guiding us through this turmoil. As we follow Juliet, we slowly come to understand some of the mysteries behind the characters, and start to see why they act as they do.

The writing is smooth and well paced, with clear and vivid descriptions of characters and places that keep the reader in touch with the story. I have one caveat to that, though - the author has a tendency to jump out of the middle of crucial conversations into another scene, set sometime later. The results of the conversation are then summarised in flashback. I found the technique confusing, and it spoiled the flow and sense of place of the story. But that's a minor quibble, and perhaps just my own perception.

To me, this is a romance, a mystery, an exploration of the deep areas of human motivations. It's about the need for honesty in relationships, and about the search for healing from the past. It roams the wild borderlands between mysticism and theology - difficult territory to navigate, but the writer takes us through to a satisfactory and fulfilling conclusion.

And she's got it exactly right about picnics!

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## **Erika says**

Mystical Circles is filled with a cast of characters that are at times both very large and very strange. And if nothing else, this novel is definitely a character study of those that live on the fringe. Being a New Age group, you can imagine there are a mix of different ideas and different people that come from all walks of life. But Mystical Circles is not just a character study. It is also a thriller with a bit of mystery, a bit of romance, career, and sisterly love.

I really enjoyed this book. It felt like it took no time at all to read. The tone of writing was very dark and mysterious. Yet, the happiness of some characters and way they enjoyed staying cut off from the world, attending strange classes that had them all acting out their internal struggles or desires - it was such a stark contrast that the darkness to it never took over too much and overwhelmed the story. Instead, everything worked so well together. My only complaint is that the plot seemed a little weak. I had wished that the author

would have gone for something quite big and dramatic. Instead we have a mix of things that just sort of happen, and eventually through all of those happenings, Juliet gets her answers. There are also times when I wanted the plot to move faster - especially those times Juliet is trying to get an answer out of Craig or Don or really any of the other characters - and she is completely sidetracked and lets them sweep the question under the rug, so to speak. It was really frustrating!

As for the romance between Juliet and Craig, I just didn't get it. Hypothetically, I could see the two of them falling in love, but something seemed missing on Juliet's side. This probably has to do with the fact that she herself struggles with wanting to be with him. But her closeness to Craig, and his father, was really quite chilling. Again, that darkness and thriller aspect of the book really shone.

I enjoyed *Mystical Circles* and would recommend it to those who love a bit of mystery and romance but also to those who love to explore different point of view and thought. This New Age place that Juliet goes to is really fascinating and the characters are really worth reading about, in my opinion.

\* Reviewed on Suddenly Books ([www.suddenlybooks.blogspot.com](http://www.suddenlybooks.blogspot.com))

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### **Alison says**

I enjoyed this. The characters were well drawn and the plot was interesting. I would have liked a little more emphasis on Zoe who was the character who we knew least about although she was the reason for Juliet's visit.

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### **Eleanor Stoneham says**

#### The Wheel of Blighted Love

Radio journalist Juliet, obsessed with rescuing her sister Zoe from a beautiful Cotswold Wheel of Love retreat farmhouse, gains entry to the house under the smokescreen of preparing a documentary for her boss back in London. But what is she rescuing her sister from? And what kind of retreat house is this?

Wryly referred to as the Wheel of Blighted Love by one of the guests, it gradually becomes clear that this retreat is not all it seems on the surface, that the charismatic leader Craig has his own reasons for choosing the bunch of misfits gathered under this seemingly idyllic roof. Juliet is given permission to interview all the guests to access their innermost thoughts and feelings, and against her better judgment soon gets caught up in the intrigues and loves of the community.

The book gets off to a good start, it has a reasonable pace and there is sufficient intrigue left at the end of each chapter to encourage me to carry on to know what happens. I did find it slowed down a little in the middle, and wanted to skip some pages in my impatience to get to the end. But finish it I had to, and after a few surprising twists and turns towards the end all becomes clear and it has a satisfying conclusion for all concerned. I think the book would have benefited from being somewhat shorter - this may be me being really picky - and for that reason would have rated as 3 1/2 if such a thing were possible! - it is a good undemanding but satisfying read for the holiday suitcase.

Actually it was the Kindle version I read.

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## **Roxanne Crouse says**

Mystical Circles by SC Skillman is a romantic suspense novel about Juliet, a freelance radio journalist, who fears for her sister Zoe, who has joined a strange group called The Wheel of Love and has fallen head over heels for the leader. Juliet arrives on the farm where the group resides to record a documentary, but also to rescue her sister from the strange group's clutches. While there, Juliet becomes drawn into the secrecy of the group and goes on a mission to uncover the truth.

The blurb on Amazon and the free sample I read on my kindle led me to believe that this book would be about a woman trying to save her sister from a strange cult compound like Waco Texas, but ends up being sucked in and/or falling in love with someone in the group. She then discovers something sinister about the group and needs to escape. Since I've never had any contact with a group like that, I thought it would be an interesting read to watch how a normal person is sucked into a cult. That's not what this book is about so don't make the same mistake as me.

The Wheel of Love group is not a cult; it's more like a random assortment of people thrown together, all of them with problems they are trying to hide. It's hardly a retreat center. The participants only take part in two activities during the entire novel, a weird form of meditation, and dream yoga. The characters spend most of their time eating and drinking wine and perusing and arguing with each other.

There is no serious danger in this story for the protagonist to overcome, only the secrets The Wheel of Love members won't reveal. Mystical Circles is a novel of troubled people working out their deep seeded issues and finding love. If that's the type of story you enjoy, then you've come to the right novel.

Unfortunately, it's not my type of story. It realistically portrays everyday life problems like mental illness and entrepreneurs with no business sense. I read to escape reality. I kept hoping the person who didn't eat at dinner would end up being a vampire or Craig the leader had some sort of twist to him because he kept shifting his appearance during dinner. No such luck.

About forty percent into the novel, I lost interest. The book is slow-moving and not a lot of excitement. I had no emotional involvement with the characters. I tried to pin down why. I think it's because the reader is constantly being told by the author how to feel about situations instead of letting the reader experience the action that would generate the feelings in the reader.

The kindle formatting needs to be redone at the beginning of the novel, the stuff before chapter one. I don't think it's displaying the way the author intends. Some page breaks might fix the problem. Some writing issues could be addressed, such as using "was" when it's not needed. The beats between character dialog are dry at times and become repetitive, but other than that no major editing problems.

This book isn't for me, but there are definitely readers out there for it. If you enjoy delving into people's personal problems, knowing their dark secrets, then you will enjoy this book.

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## **Alice says**

Something between an Aga saga, a spiritual novel and a psychological thriller this is an involving, intricate book. A lot of its appeal lies within the varied, fascinating characters who's individual voices weave seamlessly into the novel as a whole and the actions of Juliet, the radio journalist intent on reducing her sister from the 'circle of love' cult, and an admirable heroine. i really came to care for the clearly written characters, and the last few chapters kept me in an eager state of suspense. A good, easy read.

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### **Kristina Franken says**

I highly recommend this book for anyone

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