



The Cassandra

Sharma Shields

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***The Cassandra* follows a woman who goes to work in a top secret research facility during WWII, only to be tormented by visions of what the mission will mean for humankind.**

Mildred Groves is an unusual young woman. Gifted and cursed with the ability to see the future, Mildred runs away from home to take a secretary position at the Hanford Research Center in the early 1940s. Hanford, a massive construction camp on the banks of the Columbia River in remote South Central Washington, exists to test and manufacture a mysterious product that will aid the war effort. Only the top generals and scientists know that this product is processed plutonium, for use in the first atomic bombs.

Mildred is delighted, at first, to be part of something larger than herself after a lifetime spent as an outsider. But her new life takes a dark turn when she starts to have prophetic dreams about what will become of humankind if the project is successful. As the men she works for come closer to achieving their goals, her visions intensify to a nightmarish pitch, and she eventually risks everything to question those in power, putting her own physical and mental health in jeopardy. Inspired by the classic Greek myth, this 20th century reimagining of Cassandra's story is based on a real WWII compound that the author researched meticulously. A timely novel about patriarchy and militancy, *The Cassandra* uses both legend and history to look deep into man's capacity for destruction, and the resolve and compassion it takes to challenge the powerful.

The Cassandra Details

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From Reader Review *The Cassandra* for online ebook

Aimee Dars says

In 1944, Mildred Groves, Star Pupil (of six) at the Omak Secretarial School, becomes a secretary for Dr. Phillip Hall at the top-secret World War II facility Hanford in South Central Washington state. Her new job represents not just a chance to contribute to the war effort but also a way to escape her domineering mother and sister. But Mildred is not just an excellent employee--she possesses an unusual gift. She receives visions that foretell the future. As a child, her visions earned her the moniker "Mad Mildred," and she learned to be silent and keep her premonitions secret. But with production of "the product" speeding up, Mildred has renewed visions of overwhelming death and destruction. She is no longer able to remain silent, yet no one believes her prognostications. Again, people see her as "Mad Mildred." Still, her visions gain strength until she must act to stop them to save herself if not the world.

Unusual in its combination of historical fiction and fantasy, *The Cassandra* has a number of strengths. Before reading this book, I didn't know about the Hartford facility, and here, it is realistically depicted, including the intensive secrecy, the racial segregation, the divisions based on gender, and the devastation to the community and the environment. *The Cassandra* also offers a rich palette of symbolism, using the wind, rivers, birds, and animals to convey messages of fear, punishment, and overwhelming emotion. Mildred in particular struggles against the expectations of gender and the power and violence embodied by men, at times resistant, at times embracing it.

An interesting character, Mildred begins the novel with wide-eyed, naive optimism, but as she learns more about the "product" and experiences more visions and the accompanying dismissal of them, she becomes cynical and isolated, mistrustful of even her closest friends. Her language takes on a harsher tone, and her lost innocence is reflective in her coarse words, including the integration of such terms as fuck, shit, and asshole. Her withdrawal becomes accentuated when she falls victim to violence and then perpetuates that violence on others and herself. Some of the other characters are more one-dimensional, especially the villains in the story, and I wish they'd have been developed more realistically, although others reveal unexpected depth and compassion.

When Mildred experiences her visions, she encounters shape-shifters and tricksters, and the language of the novel slides to metaphorical. At times, this works, but at times, the combination of historical fiction and fantasy have an uneasy alliance, and the book I think struggles to integrate them. Still, the visions are haunting, and in one in particular, from the point of view of a young girl, readers see the impact of the atomic bombs on the hibakusha, the Japanese survivors affected by radiation poisoning, in a harrowing way that will remain with me for a long time.

The Cassandra questions how women or disenfranchised can make a difference when their wisdom is ignored and challenges a particularly masculine relationship with the world. While it doesn't provide answers, it offers a rich tapestry to consider. Fans of *The Future Home of a Living God* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* will be particularly pleased with this book as will readers of feminist fiction.

Thank you to Netgalley and Henry Holt & Company for an advance reader's copy in exchange for an honest review.

Cynthia says

The Cassandra takes the myth/figure of Cassandra - who was cursed to voice true prophecies that no one will believe - and places her in 1940s Washington, working as a secretary for a mysterious project that will help the Allies win World War II.

Millie applies for the secretarial position at Hanford in order to escape her abusive and stifling home life. She immediately hits it off with Beth, a nurse who is starting work at Hanford at the same time, and for the first time feels like she might fit in somewhere and be accepted for who she is. However, she can't escape the visions that plague her, and nothing has changed as much as she may have hoped.

Sharma Shields does a great job setting tension and creating an atmosphere of dread; The Cassandra is a great character study with a terrible sense of inevitability and slowly building madness. I simultaneously wanted to hug and protect Millie, and shake her out of frustration.

Recommended for readers of feminist fiction or who enjoy character studies.

Thank you to Netgalley and Henry Holt & Company for an advance reader's copy in exchange for an honest review.

Geonn Cannon says

3.5. I wanted to like this book a lot more than I did. I'm not sure why exactly it didn't work for me, and I think it might be that I just never quite warmed to the main character. The setting and plot were great, and Mildred was perfectly of her time. She was exactly the type of person you might find rebelling against the family and society expectations set in front of her, but I also kind of found her bland. She made the biggest decision of her life because of a vision. She didn't make a choice, she just saw it and basically shrugged and said, "Guess I'll do this now." It felt very much like the story was telling her, rather than her influencing events.

I also debated whether or not to include this, since it does happen after the halfway point of the book, but there is a graphic and very violent depiction of sexual assault which some readers may find very upsetting.

Miranda says

As a Classics major, I was immediately taken with the idea of a book that retold the story of Cassandra, a character history and the male writers who have handled her have often unfairly dismissed. This book, then, which catapults the character to center stage -only this time in Washington during WWII - was one I immediately knew I HAD to read.

As a whole, I really enjoyed this book. The plot was new and interesting, and there were just enough hints of the classical Cassandra to keep me interested and invested in her character. I also think the book highlighted the mistreatment of minorities and women during this time period, the latter of which was particularly true with the protagonist, Millie, the new Cassandra, who, in a world/society that does not believe in prophets like citizens of Ancient Greece, has her visions explained away by the assumption that she is mental or suffering

from hysteria.

What I didn't like about this book was the almost infuriating naïveté of Millie as well as the slowness of the story in certain places.

Bandit says

Book descriptions tend to give too much away, so I often merely skim them to determine interest. From skimming this one I expected something with war experiments and psychics along the lines of mind control experiments of 50s, 60s and 70s, but this is essentially Manhattan Project material. Creation and implementation of the atomic bombs during the end of WWII as witnessed by a helpless prophet. Cassandra is a tragic figure of Greek Mythology. There are different versions of the story, but traditionally the Apollo is to blame, after being spurned by Cassandra despite his gift of prophecy, he punished her so that she'd never be believed. What a thing to do, what a fate. She's become an archetype, a cautionary tale, a metaphor. There's even a Cassandra complex. So you're not going in expecting a happy story, but this book isn't merely dark, it's emotionally devastating. It requires immediate infusion of sunshine or something equally joyous upon completion. It starts off relatively upbeat as a young woman sets off getting away from her comedically terrible family to start a new well paying job as a typist. The project is secret, but everyone's very proud to contribute to war efforts. And then the visions come, visions no one believes, visions everyone perceives as madness exhibited. Because the project is creating the world's deadliest weapons, a devastation no one can even imagine, save for one woman. Gender politics (grotesquely unbalanced as they were back in the day) aside, there's absolutely no way Mildred (the book's Cassandra) can do a thing to change the already set course. To have such knowledge and be powerless to affect a change is tragic enough, with sudden violent attack thrown in it becomes catastrophic, sending the unheeded prophet spinning out of any bounds of normalcy previously so tenaciously clung to. In the end it seems the only option is to sit back and witness the world go by, helpless and resigned. So yeah...a very heavy story. Potently so. Essentially a tale of the way the world stomps out one's innocence. Definitely didn't go in the direction my imagination took the skimmed contents originally, not in tone, not in context. It was still very much a good read, very well written, much food for thought. But terribly bleak, especially when read in more or less one go. But right on cue as I'm finishing up this review the sun finally came out, so there's that. Thanks Netgalley.

The Lexington Bookie says

This eARC was provided through NetGalley from Henry Holt & Company in exchange for an honest review.

I hate it when I have to DNF a book, but even more so because this novel is from NetGalley, and a publisher approved me to read it. It feels like I let them down, but at the same time, it's about honesty in the review, is it not? Which is why I always explain my reasoning behind a DNF'd book.

In *The Cassandra*, the main character, Mildred, seems to be a pleasant girl looking for adventure- anything to take her from the monotony of caring for her heartbroken, ailing mother. Mildred is also a psychic whose visions mostly come during sleep, and are usually acted out while unconsciously asleep. The premise of the novel seemed interesting to me, the cover grabbed my attention, and I knew from its description that there would be historical WWII context as Mildred applied to be a secretary at the Handford Research Center, which lead the development of the atomic bombs.

I got about 20% into the book, struggling with the obscure writing technique that made the character's voice difficult to understand in my head. She was gullible, smart, determined, afraid... so many emotions and just all over the place. I got frustrated with this, which furthered my disconnection to the story and it's main character. Trying to hang in there, I kept hoping for something to pique my interest the plot, but I kept feeling like I was getting whiplash from all the jumping around.

Therefore, I decided to not finish *The Cassandra*.

(This review will be posted on my blog (www.thelexingtonbookie.com) at a later date.)

Sandra says

Wow, that took a number of unexpected turns.

This book is powerful in the dark shadowy way it presents the effects of war, the deep issues of developing the atomic bomb, the rashness of men, and the exploitation/victimization of women. Though, not just women - also children, "weak" men, those of other races or places, and really anyone different. It truly lays bare some of the worst we humans contain.

The voice it's told in is unique, and while it worked for this book, I'm not sure how I felt about Mildred. I wanted to like her, to feel for her, to connect with her, but I'm not sure I did. There were certainly times I did, but there was some small gap I could never quite close. That, combined with a couple of story events, kept this book at 3 rather than 4 stars for me.

If you like quirky, dark (but not in a gothic way) books, and those about America during WWII, then I'd say give this one a whirl.

Courtney Lynn (reorganizedreading) says

"I didn't start this. I'm a part of it now, but it's not my fault. This is the plot of men."

For those of you who are jumping into mythology retellings (i.e. *The Silence of the Girls*, *Circe*), this is one you will definitely not want to miss! *The Cassandra* takes a classic mythology story and inserts it into a modern(ish) setting that totally makes sense.

Sharma Shields places a reincarnation of the figure Cassandra from Greek mythology into a WW2 production camp. Cassandra takes shape in character Mildred Groves, a secretary working at Hanford Research Center. Mildred is plagued by visions of what is to take pass in the days leading up to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Albeit, she has no idea what the visions mean, or the type of work she is contributing to. All Mildred knows is that she is apart of something larger than herself, something greater that will help win the war.

The plot is intriguing, disorienting and dark at times. As a reader, you are thrust into Mildred's mindset, which makes you start to question is she really a visionary like Cassandra? Is she mad? Or is her mental instability a result of working in close proximity to the many toxins that went into building an atomic bomb?

Shields has crafted a story that functions as an allusion to a tragic and lesser known tale within Greek mythology. A story about a woman who was forced to be silenced, similarly how Mildred is forced into silence. This is a story that should not be forgotten, but celebrated. The references made to Cassandra's story are not obvious, but woven in subtly. I would highly recommend familiarizing yourself with that of Cassandra prior to reading this to receive the full and enriching experience Shields creates.

I think the weaving together of both stories is believable in the context of history. I think as a literary work that inspires deep thought and interpretation, this is a great story.

My one issue with this one was the writing of the visions were at times dense, and hard to interpret. Parts of the plot's trajectory were a little slow, but I found this one wholly unique and enjoyable. I would recommend.

Kelli says

3.5 Stars

I really wanted to like this one a lot more than I did. It had all the elements of a great story for me; the time-period, the drama, the characters who were somewhat dark and twisty. I think it was the whole future-telling aspect that I just couldn't get into.

It was a very poetic book. The language used and the depictions of Milly's visions were beautiful, but just not quite what I expected and they kind of put up a wall for me and created that gap that prevented me from really loving and investing in this book.

The drama was all good and I really enjoyed the majority of the characters, but I also felt a little lacking in closeness to the main character, Milly. For some reason, I didn't feel like I knew her like I felt like I knew the other characters. I couldn't quite get inside her head and understand her thoughts and actions by any means.

Overall, not a bad book. Just not one that I was expecting and one I would not necessarily read again. But that is most likely just my preferences, not a reflection of the quality of book that it is.

**Many thanks to Sharma Shields, Henry Holt and Company, and NetGalley for an advanced e-book in exchange for an honest review.

Mary says

The Cassandra had such an interesting premise: a young woman who has very clear and graphic visions of the future is excited to leave her dysfunctional and claustrophobic family life to work as a secretary at the mysterious Hanford government research facility in Washington, but once there begins to suffer from visions of the death and destruction that will be brought about by the nuclear bombs for which Hanford is supplying the plutonium. I liked that it was a modern retelling of the Cassandra myth, having recently read and enjoyed Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, a twist on the Antigone story, and I liked the World War II period setting.

Things fell apart for me very quickly, however, starting with the fact that the characters—and most particularly the main character Mildred Groves—are not developed into believable people who draw you

into the story. They are either completely one-dimensional (particularly Mildred's harridan of a mother and a sister—characters so unsympathetic that I could never understand why Mildred would try to maintain any sort of relationship with them) or underdeveloped, like Mildred's Hanford friend Beth, who is supposed to be her wise and sensible protector and confidante but who acts inconsistently throughout. The biggest problem, however, is Mildred herself, an odd and unlikable character who swings from excitement and happiness to fear and distrust in a heartbeat and whose many eccentricities aren't in the least endearing. Of her fortuitous meeting with Beth on the bus to Hanford, Mildred says, "The friendship shocked me in its immediate affection." It shocked me, too. (And don't even get me started on Gordon, Tom Cat and Kathy.)

The best parts of the book for me by far were the scenes of the Hanford facility. Shields does a very good job of making this vast settlement in the middle of the Washington prairie come alive with her descriptions of the campus, the dining hall, the food, and the ever persistent wind. It is obvious she did a lot of research but every time the book started to explore the actual scientific work being done at Hanford, Mildred would have another vision and we'd be off down another path—and a very weird one at that. The final quarter of the book lurches into all-out melodrama territory, with a rape, a murder, self mutilation, and a mental institution. By this time, however—and much like Mildred herself—I just wanted it to end.

I really wish I liked this more and could get behind it, but I appreciate receiving an ARC from NetGalley and Henry Holt publishers in return for my honest review.

Crystal King says

The Cassandra is a modern retelling of the ancient Greek myth, this time set in Washington state. It begins in the town where my own father grew up and so I immediately felt a connection to the character...Omak is not a place well known to many! Mildred ends up at Hanford during WWII when the nuclear plant was most instrumental in making the most powerful weapon in the history of mankind..This is not an easy tale to read emotionally, (particularly in our tumultuous times) but it is brilliantly told and will leave you thinking for days and weeks to come.

Amber Ladd says

(This book was not meant for me but it doesn't mean it's a bad book.)

The Cassandra is a novel set in WW2 that follows a young woman named Mildred, who had a special gift of seeing the future. She embarks on a journey of leaving her abusive family by way of finding a job outside of her home town as a secretary at a work camp, where her work contributes to the efforts in aiding the allies in WW2. As time goes on, Mildred's visions of the future grow stronger, and she comes to realize that the work camp's efforts may be doing more harm than anyone could have imagined.

The high points of this book were that writing is extremely eerie and eloquent, moreso as the story progresses and the main character begins to lose herself to her visions. The loose retelling of The Cassandra in and of itself was quite lovely. Her visions often lead her, sleepwalking, to a roaring river at night. I found these encounters with her visions nightmarish, darkly seductive, and mistifying.

However, I personally found the rest of the book a little underwhelming. The bonds between characters are

too quickly formed, the male characters are mostly flat, the way the characters talk about their "project" (which turns out to be the creation of the atomic bomb) veered a little on the childish side, the plot dragged in many places, and our main character, Millie, is largely unlikeable due to how much of a doormat she comes across as.

Now don't get me wrong, I will not deny that Sharma Shields is an excellent writer, but this story in particular fell flat to me. All in all, this novel was not for me, but I'm definitely going to be following this writer in the future. 2.5/5 stars.

Edwin Howard says

Mildred Groves in *THE CASSANDRA*, by Sharma Shields, wants to escape the life she has been dealt caretaking for her cantankerous, angry mother. She finds a job at Hanford, a secret government base where the "product" is being created and help is needed by the bus full. Mildred develops friendships and relishes in her new life, but quickly her hidden ability, having accurate visions of the future, begins to overwhelm her life and reveal so many truths to her that she finds it hard to live in the present with the future constantly swirling around her. Mildred must reconcile the present and the future and find out what she wants and whether she is satisfied with what the future holds.

Shields does a masterful job of creating Mildred Groves. Not only is she likable and the reader pulls for her, but Mildred's voice is so clear that no choice she makes, while shocking at times, is unbelievable in any way. The setting at Hanford during World War II is compelling as well, the image of futuristic technological advancement in a desert almost void of life mirrors Mildred's simple views of right and wrong butting heads with the philosophical considerations of the intellectual giants Mildred works for. From Mildred's overbearing mother, to her caring but guarded boss (Dr. Hall), to her best friend throughout most of the book (Beth) who would do anything to help Mildred but will always make the easy choices in her own life, Sharma wastes no character and makes them as three dimensional as possible and each fascinating in their own right.

Shields is an excellent storyteller. As I read *THE CASSANDRA*, I enjoyed discovering Mildred's world, the good and bad of it, and I look forward to reading another book by Shields in the future.

I received this book as part of the LibraryThing Early Reviewers program.

Nancy says

3.5

Sharma Shield's novel *The Cassandra* was a very dark read. The protagonist Mildred Groves' gift of prophecy alienates her from her family and the larger society. She struggles with a desire to fit in while visions reveal horrifying inevitabilities and men's true natures.

Mildred seizes the chance to escape her suffocating home and needy mother, thrilled to find work at a WWII government research facility in a remote part of Washington on the Columbia River. The "project" will shorten the war, she is told. Mildred becomes an esteemed worker, makes her first best friend, and even gains an admirer. She revels in the freedom.

But night finds her sleepwalking and experiencing gruesome dreams of the project's dire consequences for humanity.

Shields vividly describes the historical Hanford Project research facility, part of the Manhattan Project--the wind and dust, the subjugation of minorities and women, the ignorance of the workers and the willingness of the researchers to risk environmental degradation to win the arms race.

Mildred's abuse and violent acts in response to her inability to change events around her are disturbing. More disturbing is humanity's blind determination in believing that the ultimate weapon will save the world.

I received a free book from the publisher through LibraryThing.

Jypsy says

Based in mythology, The Cassandra is a harrowing read. Cassandra was a prophet with the gift of true visions of the future, and the curse of no one ever believing her visions are true. Imagine seeing the fruition of The Manhattan Project before it actually happens. Now, imagine having no way to stop what you have seen, and everyone believes you are just some crazy person. The story is straight up bleak. The characters are engaging and tragic. I liked the story overall because I'm interested in the time period. I also disliked the story because of it's weight of sadness. I'm torn on how I feel.
