



13½

Nevada Barr

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In 1971, the state of Minnesota was rocked by the "Butcher Boy" incident, as coverage of a family brutally murdered by one of their own swept across newspapers and television screens nationwide.

Now, in present-day New Orleans, Polly Deschamps finds herself at yet another lonely crossroads in her life. No stranger to tragedy, Polly was a runaway at the age of fifteen, escaping a nightmarish Mississippi childhood.

Lonely, that is, until she encounters architect Marshall Marchand. Polly is immediately smitten. She finds him attractive, charming, and intelligent. Marshall, a lifelong bachelor, spends most of his time with his brother Danny. When Polly's two young daughters from her previous marriage are likewise taken with Marshall, she marries him. However, as Polly begins to settle into her new life, she becomes uneasy about her husband's increasing dark moods, fearing that Danny may be influencing Marshall in ways she cannot understand.

But what of the ominous prediction by a New Orleans tarot card reader, who proclaims that Polly will murder her husband? What, if any, is the Marchands' connection to the infamous "Butcher Boy" multiple homicide? And could Marshall and his eccentric brother be keeping a dark secret from Polly, one that will shatter the happiness she has forever prayed for?

13½ Details

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From Reader Review 13½ for online ebook

Becca says

Definitely not one of her best. Barr has really gotten off track lately with all the torturous detail about relentlessly gruesome, cruel, or gory aspects of her stories.

This is by far the worst case of it yet, with detailed recountings of murders, torture, animal cruelty, etc. and a painfully long, drawn-out, microscopically detailed discussion of every ounce of content in a hoarder's apartment.

In terms of plot, it's a bit gimmicky, too, though you see the gimmick coming from quite a ways away.

The Anna Pigeon mysteries have been going in this direction for a while. This is like that, but ten times worse, as there's nothing pleasant, or even neutral, to counter the unremittingly bleak wallowing in human cruelty and misery.

Zinta says

I am holding Nevada Barr responsible: since picking up her newest novel, *13 ½*, I have been losing sleep. Until the very last page had been read, sleep continued to evade me.

In all my lifelong voracious reading habits, I continue to find that writers can generally be classified in one of two groups: fine literary writers or terrific storytellers. Because the skill set and high level of artistry required is quite different for each group, rarely do the two groups meet and mesh. But Nevada Barr stands neatly balanced, with one foot inside each of these two groups. She is a fine writer, with literary finesse, and she is one heck of a storyteller.

Barr kept me awake with her storytelling, but not before messing with my head a bit, along with my sleep patterns. When I first opened the cover of *13 ½*, I was thrown into a horrific scene of sexual molestation. Polly, a girl not yet nine years old, is being raped by her mother's whiskey-chugging boyfriend. Rather than protect and defend her daughter, Polly's alcoholic mother gets jealous and angry with her. Too frequently, this scenario is all too real. Victims become victimizers, and Polly's mother, her own self-esteem nonexistent, allows her daughter to become victimized. At such a very tender age, this child understands the male psyche far beyond what she should: *"Though Polly's birthday wasn't for a couple weeks, she already knew what it meant when men's eyes went gooey and nasty."*

The message of this scene, however, is not so much victimization as survival skills. Polly grows up to be a smart woman, one who has fortunately been strong enough to break the cycle of abuse and instead is a loving and protective mother of her own children.

Stage left, enter another main character: Butcher Boy. This child, Dylan, wakes into a family massacre, his parents murdered with an axe, his baby sister dead, his older brother badly wounded. He alone is whole, however dazed. Eleven years old, he is dragged to court and prosecuted for the vicious murder of his family. The boy hardly seems able to function as his mind and emotions shut down under the weight of something so immense, so incomprehensible. Only his surviving brother stands by him.

Barr does a wonderful job of describing a juvenile justice system that is highly dysfunctional. Children who end up in juvenile delinquent homes, more often than not already coming from abusive homes, are often subjected to more abuse by the very staff who is supposed to help them rehabilitate. Reality, alas, matches fiction, and Barr has shone an important spotlight on a growing problem in our society. Dylan is thrown away, with no one caring enough to deal with his problems, and he spends years in a world where guards beat and rape little boys, psychologists and social workers conduct unethical experiments on their young prey, and wardens look the other way. The only person left who seems to care that Dylan is even alive is his brother Rich.

Back and forth. The novel is written in scenes that move from Polly to Dylan and his brother Rich, then suddenly switching to Marshall Marchand and his brother, Danny, a couple of stand-up guys. Between chapters are blood-curdling little inserts, written in first person, of child murderers, mothers who kill their babies, and other psychopaths. A bit disorienting, and I was a little annoyed at being jarred back and forth between all these characters ... until it started to fall into place. The Marchand brothers enter into the adult Polly's world, and by now, also her two young daughters.

Suspense growing, tension tightening, the reader is led along, then pulled into a vortex of escalating horror. Polly and her girls are in danger, and as a mother, my heart pounded with hers, knowing all that she does to protect her own, I would do, too. Yet how clear is the mind of one who has been so badly abused as a child? Does Polly still have the skills to know who to trust and who is just another victimizer? The sad truth is that many who are molested as children, grow up to be attracted like magnets to more molesters, not knowing anything else. Is Polly protecting her daughters from the right man? Does her love for one of the Marchand brothers cloud her judgment?

The clock on my nightstand screaming at me that I should be sound asleep on a work night, I keep reading. And reading. Must know.

Another character to whom we are introduced is the Woman in Red. She reads Tarot-cards and is big, and loud, and impossible to miss. Almost no one notices that inside this woman is complete emotional devastation—another victim of abuse. Barr excels in her literary descriptions when Polly and this woman meet.

"The Woman in Red it shall be," Polly said and smiled as ghosts of her past walked away giggling. She'd noticed the reader on previous pilgrimages to the square in search of her future. It was hard not to. Shades of shrieking sunset, roses, and hearts of fire, cherries, apples, blood, and wine were thrown together. If one shade of red was loud, this woman's ensemble was cacophonous.

"Before time and sunlight had taken its toll, her khaki-colored setup had evidently been as red as the rest of her. As she shifted her considerable weight, her chair's wooden frame moved and flashed thin ribbons of the canvas's original color, that of freshly butchered meat. Polly descended the cathedral steps and the fortune-teller leaned forward, reaching out with a beggar's aspect—or that of a drowning woman bent on pulling her rescuer down. 'For zee lady, zee reading eez free,' she said in a voice both ruined and childlike, the worn-out voice tape of a Chatty Cathy doll with a fake French accent. Hucksters and harlots never honestly meant anything was free. Having been a little of both in her time, Polly knew 'free' just opened the bargaining."

An especially masterly scene in Barr's psychological thriller is one in which a Tarot-card reader is murdered—by the man she loves. With expertise, Barr describes the psychological devastation that is necessary for a woman to become emotionally battered, becoming utterly helpless to defend herself, even

against her own murderer. She loves this villain, and despises herself, right up to her last breath, even as the ax comes down.

Then, when Polly finds the dead woman's body, the villain comes after her.

“Scrabbling on sliding magazines, Polly was losing ground. The man’s fingers were wire cables, his strength enough to drag her backwards. Far stronger than she, he could have hammered her kidneys with balled fists; he could have thrown himself upon her and snapped her neck or slammed her head into the floor. He did none of these things; slowly, as if he savored the process, he was pulling her into himself, swallowing her as a snake would swallow a mouse. Garbage piled up under Polly’s chin, drowning her. Scrabbling on the glossy magazines, her hands found no purchase...”

Although I do have to confess here that I had the mystery solved long before the conclusion of the novel, it did not slow my eager reading by one half of a page turn. I did not want to miss any of Barr's pulsing-with-life descriptions, deep dives into the most shadowy parts of human nature, and the intricacies of dance between victim and victimizer. I wanted to see justice done. And I wanted to read exactly how Barr would put it into words. The images she created are lasting long beyond the final page. The important messages she illustrates remain even longer: abuse of any kind causes unspeakable damage, and those of us who do nothing about a broken juvenile justice system, or the increase of domestic violence, or look past the suffering of the battered, make such crime possible. This novel is more than a thriller. This is no time to sleep. This is a wake-up call.

Nevada Barr is an award-winning novelist and *New York Times* bestselling author. Among other works, she is also well known as the author of the Anna Pigeon mysteries (see my earlier review of *Borderline*).

~Zinta Aistars for The Smoking Poet, Fall 2009

Rosina Lippi says

I wish Barr would write more novels like this, rather than the Anna Pigeon novels which have never really kept my interest.

BIG BIG SPOILERS FOLLOW

This novel worked for me on multiple levels, but most important is the fact that I was totally engaged in the two main characters -- Polly, who walks away from an alcoholic, abuse mother at a young age and works hard to get to a better life, and Dylan Raines, who is found guilty of murdering his parents and sister at age eleven, and is committed to a psychiatric facility in a juvenile detention center in rural Minnesota.

Twenty-five years later, Polly and Dylan (now called Marshall) meet in post-Katrina New Orleans, where he is a well established architect, and she is a professor, divorced, with two young daughters. Marshall shares a house with his brother Richard, the only survivor of the family massacre, who stood by him while he was incarcerated and then relocated with him afterward so they could start over again. Marshall is quiet, thoughtful, kind, and immediately drawn to Polly. She feels the same way. Her daughters, hypersensitive and critical of anyone who shows interest in their mother, love him too.

Shortly after they marry, disturbing things begin to happen. Things that are reminiscent of the murders which Dylan/Marshall still does not remember. He believes that he is falling back into whatever kind of insanity made him pick up the axe when he was eleven.

Here's the spoiler, which I bring up because it had a big impact on my reading.

Very early in the novel, just after Polly and Marshall meet, I realized that it wasn't Dylan/Marshall but his brother Richard who had murdered their parents and sister (and cat) and then manipulated the outcome so that Dylan would be convicted. For those twenty-five years Richard never confessed to his brother, but he does not like the fact that Dylan has a new family and is now less dependent on him.

Which is a fine premise, but the fact that I figured it out so quickly would have normally ruined this novel for me. The thing is, it is so well written and Dylan/Marshall is such a compelling character that I kept reading anyway. Certainly the nature of Richard's insanity was of interest, but mostly it was Dylan I wanted to know about.

Which is why this novel worked so well for me.

I note that many faithful readers of the Anna Pigeon novels were deeply disappointed by this stand-alone story. That strikes me as sad. A writer who restricts herself to one set of characters for twenty books needs to stretch her wings once in a while, or things get stale. It's narrow of readers to criticize her for this detour - especially as it is so well done.

It is only fair to judge this novel on its own merits, without reference to Anna Pigeon.

Kristen says

Wow. I would have to say, that from her break of writing Anna Pigeon national park mysteries, she had broken into the niche of writing psychological thrillers very well. This thriller would put you at the edge of the seat for an emotional and intense roller coaster ride, when the past collides with the present to prevent an inevitable future of history repeating itself. If you haven't read her mysteries, start now. If you have, like I've been, keep reading on. Five stars to Nevada Barr. This gave me goosebumps.

Holly says

I was engaged in this book at first, but it didn't hold up. One of the problems is that I figured out very early what was going on. And then, as the book went on, I realized that most of the characters hadn't even figured out as much as I had. I'm not sure if that was intentional on the part of the author--like she was going for some dramatic irony or something. But, I found it quite annoying that the central characters hadn't figured out some things that seemed so obvious to me.

I have read Nevada Barr in the past, and I have to agree with many other reviewers I glanced through here--I like her Anna Pigeon books much better.

Paula says

A family is murdered and 11 year old Dillon is left holding the axe. The only survivor is his older brother and while Dillon is in a juvenile psychiatric hospital, Richard visits regularly. Dillon cannot remember anything about that horrible night.

Polly is a 15 year old girl who is abused and neglected. She runs away to New Orleans and makes a life for herself.

This is a very different story than the Anna Pigeon books but I really liked it. Quite a page turner but not for the faint of heart.

Ithlilian says

3.5 stars. When I think about it, there really isn't much to this novel. There is a woman with a troubled past who marries a man, and a kid convicted of murder. As the jacket says, these two stories become intertwined. There aren't too many scenarios that could mix those people together, so there isn't too much mystery here after a certain point. Up until everything begins to become clear, we get a riveting story of a boy who can't remember killing his family and what prison does to him. For that alone I enjoyed this book. I didn't care as much about the woman falling in love, because at that point we had so much more background about the child than her, that I didn't really sympathize with her at all. She has a few pages of a rough childhood, and then isn't heard from again until a third of the way through the book. Even still, everything comes together nicely, and this story makes you sympathize a bit for the bad guys, which I appreciate. The serial killer notes interspersed throughout also make for interesting reading, and I'm pretty happy overall with this book as a whole. A bit more character progression and detail and a bit less spitfire romance and this could have been a four star book.

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

Total waste of reading time. I kept expecting this book to get better and it just never happened.

Florence (Lefty) MacIntosh says

I'm weird enough to read a book just to satisfy my curiosity about a title. It's a prison tattoo, stands for 12 jurors, 1 judge & 1/2 a chance. If you were curious I just saved you from having to read this. Not a book for the faint hearted (and I'm not) it's just that it's OVERLOADED with excessively graphic descriptions of children being murdered; a little subtlety wouldn't have hurt.

Admittedly I got caught up in the story; I wanted to give it up but just couldn't, so I'll give the author some credit on that level. I liked the premise; just had a problem with its execution. The story of a young boy imprisoned for the murder of his family is finally (1/2 way into the book) rescued from the morose by the introduction of a love interest, a great character by the name of Polly. I also enjoy the New Orleans setting and the tarot card reader, a spicy touch. Overall it was okay but ridiculously predictable – best I can do is **1 1/2 stars**

Update: Lately I've been reading great reviews on her 'Anna Pigeon' series. Obviously I picked the wrong book as an introduction to Nevada Barr. Don't repeat my mistake, try one of those instead.

Quotable: *"Perhaps love was like the mumps. If a woman came down with it after forty, it could kill her."*

Kathleen Hagen says

13-1/2, by Nevada Barr, A, Narrated by Dan John Miller, produced by Brilliance Audio, downloaded from audible.com

This is a stand-alone and, for my money, the best book Barr has written. I like the Anna Pigeon series, but this book presents some psychologically compelling and terrifying characters. The book begins with its main characters in parallel lives in the 1970's. Rich and Dillon are two boys in an upper middle class family in Rochester, Minnesota, with what would be called everything to live for. But one night Dillon wakes up, and finds his brother, Rich, injured, and the rest of his family dead-chopped up by an axe. Everyone is convinced Dillon did it. He's the only one left whole. So at the age of eleven, he is shipped off to juvenile prison. When he comes of age, he and his brother move to New Orleans to start over with new names stolen from two brothers in a New Orleans graveyard. Dillon becomes a successful architect and lives with his brother for almost 40 years. But Dillon does not remember the killings. He believes he did it because everyone else says he did it, but he can't remember it at all. In a parallel universe, Polly is being raised by an alcoholic mother and a step-father who is just the latest in the line of men who live with her mother and molest her. At the age of sixteen, she runs away to New Orleans where she starts a new life and becomes a successful English professor. When the two meet and fall in love, past history is in danger of being repeated.

Annie says

Ok. I love, love, love Nevada from her very first book. I used to live in New Orleans and my brother still does so I love the setting but that is all I loved about it.

I have got to say that this is very violently graphic, kids dying and gross things happening... I didn't like any of the characters, I could not finish this. Bring Anna back.

Carol says

If you're expecting Anna Pigeon, put the book down! I had to ask myself where did this one come from? Left field doesn't quite explain it, but 13 1/2 is so far removed from what I've read of Nevada Barr., it's almost like an evil, gleeful twin has taken over her writing hand. I liked it, in fact, I loved it. Many fans get angry when their favorite authors stray from the garden path. I embrace it. Bring it on, show me what you've got. And show me Ms. Barr did.

Spanning forty years, we're taken on a bloody, gruesome ride, that opens with the brutal slaying of eleven year old Dylan Raines's family; mother, father and baby sister, Lena. Brother Rich, hangs on by a thread, his leg hacked, bloody and bleeding, Dylan holds the ax that killed them all. Tried, convicted and off to prison Dylan goes, presumably to rot in jail, close the door, throw away the key. Still Rich stands by his brother,

hates to see this young boy's life wasted, visits and supports him despite the awful crime and his own loss. Great characters, tight plot, fast paced psychological read. Though slightly predictable it didn't mar my enjoyment.

Barr's 13 1/2 should appeal to James Patterson fans and his ilk. The only comment I can add is Barr is better. Keep it up!

Book Concierge says

Audiobook read by Dan John Miller

3.5***

From the book jacket - Nevada Barr has written a taut and terrifying psychological thriller. It carries the reader from the horrifying 1970s murder spree of a child – dubbed “Butcher Boy” – in Rochester, Minnesota, to Polly, the abused daughter of Mississippi “trailer trash,” to post-Katrina New Orleans.

My reactions

I’ve been a fan of Barr’s Anna Pigeon mystery series for a while now, but this is a completely different standalone novel. Much darker and more terrifying than the series most readers know her by.

The dual time frames are at first confusing, but even when the reader realizes the connection between the two different stories, the tension of how it will play out remains. I was captivated from the beginning, and Barr held my attention throughout. I did figure out the twist some time before the characters did, but that didn’t lessen my enjoyment. I will warn readers that there is considerable foul language, and some very graphic scenes of violence and mayhem.

Dan John Miller does a fine job of narrating the audiobook, though his voice for the women does seem a bit “forced” - a couple of times I was reminded of my father telling me the story of Red Riding Hood and how he voiced the wolf playing the grandma. The way Barr plots and tells the story is the main reason to read this book.

Jordan Price says

My friend has been raving about Nevada Barr, so I chose this book randomly and was happy to see it was a standalone title rather than part of an ongoing series. The prose blew me away. It was clean and direct and fresh. The multiple points of view were woven in a perfect balance. Just as I was dying to find out what happened to a character, we'd pick up a thread with a new character, and within a page I'd be riveted by their story and eager to know what happened to them.

I particularly loved the way the story evolved, with hints and suspense, and that Ms. Barr was in no hurry to wrap things up for me. I loved spinning forward and trying to figure out how all these disparate threads would eventually come together.

Between the prose and the plot, I could not stop reading and finished the book in a day, which is unheard of

for me!

Laurie says

It's always a nervous time when a series author ventures out of the safety of the familiar, but this one works. It's a thriller, not a mystery; Polly Deschamps is no Anna Pigeon; and it's set, not in a national park, but post-Katrina New Orleans. But I urge you to take a step away from the familiar, and find a clever and emotionally real story about how people with calamitous pasts can make themselves anew.
