



Book of the Month

The Last Flight by Julie Clark

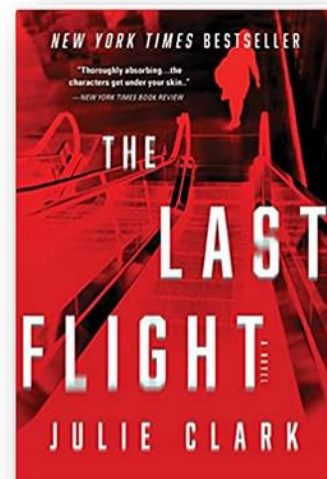
Book Review by Sue Minchew, Board of Trustees, Starkville-Oktibbeha County Public Library

Always a fan of good mysteries with authors like Michael Connelly, John Sanford, and Daniel Silva among my favorites, I was delighted to discover *The Last Flight* by Julie Clark. I was intrigued by the premise of two women swapping tickets and identities at the airport and thought that the novel would make a good read. And, boy, did it deliver. The book is one of the most engrossing and suspenseful that I have read in a while.

Clark employs alternate points of view and differing time frames as the structure of the novel. Claire Cook's narrative is told in first person, mostly present tense, while Eva James's sections are presented in third person limited narrative with her exact thoughts italicized. Moreover, Eva's sections are told in past tense. The actions center around a plane crash with such headings as "the day before the crash," "six months before the crash," and "the day of the crash."

Seemingly quite different on the surface, Claire and Eva have the same objective. They each want to escape lives that have become unbearable, even dangerous. Claire is married to the handsome, wealthy philanthropist Rory Cook, who plans to run for senator. She lives in a huge house with 10 staff members. The perfect life, right? In reality, her life is Hell. Behind closed doors, Rory is both physically abusive and controlling. Through his assistant Danielle, he monitors every move that Claire makes. She is literally imprisoned. She is also haunted by media speculation that Rory might have been involved with the death of his former fiancée, Maggie Morretti, who suspiciously died in a fire. Could Claire fall victim to a similar fate?

The daughter of a drug addict, Eva grew up in a group home run by nuns. Very intelligent, she secured a scholarship to Berkeley, where she excelled, especially in chemistry. Her boyfriend Wade, also a student in her chemistry class and quarterback of the football team, convinced Eva to make pills (uppers) to sell to other students. Flattered by his attention, she agreed. When they were caught and called to the Dean's Office, she got expelled and Wade got a mere slap on the wrist. With no personal income and no place to live, Eva fell victim to a drug dealer named Dex, who offered her a room in his apartment and a



“job” making pills for him with some leftover for her to sell. Over the 12 years that Eva made the pills for Dex, her life has become increasingly complicated, fraught with the dangers of getting caught by authorities or even killed by the drug dealers. In addition to the obvious dangers in her life, Eva is also motivated to make a change through her friendship with Liz, her neighbor and a visiting professor. Through Liz, Eva experiences true friendship and love for the first time in her life; with Liz’s encouragement, she begins to hope for a different kind of life, one something like Liz’s.

Claire very carefully plans her “escape” from Rory with the secret help of her former schoolmate Petra and her brother Nico, who has Russian mob connections. She plans to escape into Canada during her speaking engagement at a charity event in Detroit using money that she has squirreled away and false identity papers acquired through Nico. The money and identity papers will be sent ahead to her hotel. But horror of horrors, the morning of her flight, Claire wakes up to find that her trip to Detroit is off. Rory will make the speech there, and she will be sent to a charity event in Puerto Rico instead.

Eva’s plans for a new beginning are also foiled when DEA agent Castro, who had convinced her to testify against Dex, revealed that the agency would not agree to put her in Witness Protection. In desperation, Eva quickly booked a flight to Newark to reconnect with Liz, who convinces her that she should return to California and testify against Dex.

When the Eva and Claire meet in the airport, they are both desperate. Eva has decided not to go back, and Claire knows that Rory will discover her plan when he reaches Detroit. Through a chance (or is it?) conversation in the airport bar, the two women decide to exchange tickets. They have already been scanned into their respective flights and are just waiting to board, so their different appearances shouldn’t matter. During drinks at the bar, Claire confides that she is trying to escape an abusive and controlling husband; Eva claims to be evading authorities who might discover that she helped her cancer-ridden husband die. They swap clothing, papers, purses in the restroom. Claire will now be flying to Oakland and Eva will go to Puerto Rico. When Claire lands and enters Oakland Airport, she hears the news that the flight to Puerto Rico has crashed and no survivors have been found.

Claire is now adrift in Oakland with only \$400 and, to make matters worse, Petra, her only lifeline, does not answer her phone. With no other choice, she assumes Eva’s identity, cutting her long brown hair and dying it blonde. She also stays in Eva’s apartment. Tension mounts as it becomes increasingly difficult for her to survive and remain anonymous. When Claire intervenes in a fight between a player and his date at a catering event for the Oakland A’s, videos of the altercation make national news, and she is recognized.

Did Eva actually get on the flight to Puerto Rico? Several clues, including her empty seat, suggest that she did not, and for the rest of the novel the reader is held in suspense about what really happened to Eva. For much of the novel, Claire is assumed to be dead. But after the video of the catering event makes national news, she knows that she has been discovered. What will happen to her? Will the same fate that befell Maggie Moretti befall her?

The Last Flight by Julie Clark will keep you guessing about the fate of these two women until the last page. In fact, you must read the Epilogue to get the entire story. The novel is not only a really good mystery but also one that examines some important issues related to the abuse and exploitation of women. Ultimately the value of friendship and female empowerment are paramount. While I really enjoyed the novel, I did find two slight flaws in it: the sweepingly negative portrayal of all of the men

and the rather incredible coincidences. Those flaws aside, I highly recommend it as an engrossing and very entertaining read.

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