Illegally Blonde
by Nelsa Roberto

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Illegally Blonde by Toronto writer Nelsa Roberto is a coming-of-age novel for middle teens that begins in Toronto but is set mainly in rural Portugal. The story begins with seventeen-year-old Lucy do Amaral coming home after getting her hair cut and bleached blonde. Lucy anticipates a hard time from her parents who are habitually strict, but instead finds her whole family in turmoil because they have just learned they must leave Canada in less than a week. The family had immigrated from Portugal when Lucy was little, but somehow the paperwork was never finished properly. They’d spent thousands on an “immigration consultant,” but they had been scammed and now were being deported as “illegal aliens.”

Understandably, Lucy is extremely upset, particularly because her grade twelve prom is just three weeks away. She is also worried because lately her boyfriend, Joel, has been less attentive and not so eager to discuss their tentative plans of living together after graduation. If she leaves, will she lose him altogether? Can she even trust her best friend, Beth, around Joel?

Schemes to stay behind in Canada fail, and the family is sent to Portugal where they go to Montalegre, the small village near the Spanish border where Lucy’s parents had grown up. Having spent most of their money on legal wrangling, the family opts to stay with relatives in a crowded cottage. Lucy discovers she must share a room and bed with her cousin, Marta, who is not at all eager to do do. When Lucy becomes friends with the handsome Filipe, Marta’s former boyfriend, the animosity between the two increases.

Lucy is determined to get back to Toronto, even if it means buying an illegal passport and perhaps committing a crime or two along the way. Although everyone warns her against him, she enlists the help of Tomas, an unscrupulous young man she meets at the local Internet café.
Illegally Blonde has a mixture of mystery, humour and romance that most middle teens, especially girls, will enjoy. They will empathize with Lucy’s devastation at being torn away from everything she knows and loves. The suspense is intense at times, and there are some excellent cliffhangers at the ends of chapters. I liked the title with its double meaning of discovering your roots and watching them grow back.

I did feel, however, that Lucy was a little too self-centred and self-serving to be really likable. Several times I wanted to suggest she should “smarten up”! Her meeting the smooth-talking Tomas so quickly seems a little contrived, as does the book’s ending. Also, when Lucy finds a part-time job, there’s a problem with the money figures, which are quoted sometimes in dollars and sometimes in euros.

According to the author, the story’s plot was inspired by actual events that occurred in Toronto in 2006. Like her heroine, Nelsa Roberto is of Portuguese descent, although she was born in Canada.

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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