

# *Vanessa Chukwu*

## **Critical Book Review of In the Company of Secrets**

Judith Miller's historical fiction novel *In the Company of Secrets* is a compelling story about secrets, survival, and identity in 19th-century America. Olivia Mott, a young woman fleeing a troubled past, arrives in Pullman, Illinois, and secures a job as an assistant chef. However, she has lied about her skills and background, and as she tries to maintain her deception, she finds herself entangled in a web of lies that threatens her future. Miller's writing stands out through her lively dialogue, vivid descriptions, and convincing characterization.

Miller's mastery as a writer is first seen in her depiction of lively dialogue. The characters' conversations feel natural and help reveal their personalities. Olivia's nervousness and dishonesty are clear when she says, "I have had plenty of experience in the kitchen," even though she has never worked as a chef before (p. 35). Her lies create tension throughout the book, especially when her employer, Mr. Howard, questions her skills. He exclaims, "You claim to know how to prepare a full course meal, yet you cannot even chop onions properly?" (p. 42). The dialogue helps bring the characters to life and adds realism to their struggles.

Miller's use of vivid descriptions makes the setting and events feel real. When Olivia arrives in Pullman, the town is described in great detail: "The rows of identical brick houses stood neatly along the clean streets, their windows reflecting the early morning light, giving the illusion of perfection" (p. 21). This description helps the reader understand how strict and controlled life in Pullman was. Even the cooking scenes are brought to life with rich sensory details. Miller writes, "The aroma of fresh bread and roasting meat filled the air, mingling with the sharp scent of onions and garlic sizzling in butter" (p. 59). These details create a strong visual and emotional connection to the story.

Miller's ability to create realistic and relatable characters is another strength of the novel. Olivia is flawed but determined, making her a compelling protagonist. Her guilt over lying is evident when she reflects, "I never meant for things to spiral out of control, but one lie became two, then three, and now I cannot escape them" (p. 110). Lady Charlotte, Olivia's former employer, is another well-developed character. Though she appears spoiled and selfish, her desperation and fear make her more human. Even minor characters, like Fred DeVault, who becomes Olivia's friend, are given depth. His quiet but steady presence is shown when he reassures Olivia, "Not everyone in this town is looking to judge you" (p. 138). These realistic portrayals make the story more engaging.

Through lively dialogue, vivid descriptions, and convincing characterization, *In the Company of Secrets* captures the struggles of a young woman trying to find her place in a world full of strict expectations. Judith Miller's writing brings both the

characters and the historical setting to life, making the novel a compelling read. Readers who enjoy historical fiction will appreciate the depth and realism of this story.