

“Unsaid” by Neil Abramson. 2011, Hatchette Book Group. 353 pages

As a small town veterinarian, Dr. Helena Colden has gently and lovingly escorted many of her patients through their suffering and to the “other side.” Now that she is dead, she is finding it difficult to let go and move on herself. Helena is haunted by her past, and she haunts those she loved the most; her husband David and the menagerie of rescued animals that share their home.

David is a broken man. In the months following Helena’s death, he is barely coping with the day-to-day necessities of his household, and hasn’t returned to his job as an attorney at a high-powered firm in Manhattan. Helena’s animals’ needs are overwhelming, and David can’t see around his own staggering grief to understand that the animals are grieving, too.

In the final months of her life, Helena reconnected with one of her vet school colleagues, Dr. Jane Cassidy. They were research assistants together, responsible for a bonobo named Charlie. They were devastated when they realized that their work included infecting Charlie with hepatitis.

Helena’s experiences with Charlie convinced her to walk away from primate studies altogether. Jaycee, on the other hand, was driven to discover whether Charlie and his relatives possess “consciousness.” This path has led her to a four-year NIS grant and a chimp named Cindy.

Jaycee is the only mother Cindy has known. From birth, Jaycee has been teaching Cindy to communicate using a combination of American Sign Language and a specially-designed keyboard. In tests, Cindy has displayed the cognitive abilities of a four-year-old child.

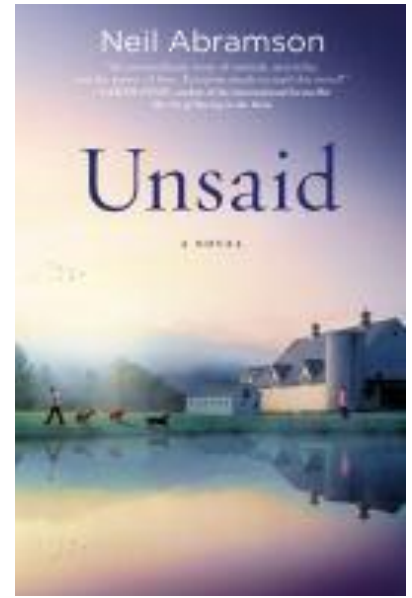
Helena is drawn to Cindy, seeing in her a chance to atone for her part in Charlie’s suffering. Cindy welcomes Helena into her trusted inner circle, communicating with her as easily as she does with Jaycee. The project is very promising, and Cindy’s safety seems to be ensured.

When the NIS cancels the project because the test results can’t be duplicated, Cindy’s future is suddenly grim. Jaycee, unable to bear the thought of Cindy being used in painful and invasive tests, acts rashly, and finds herself in serious legal trouble. Desperate, she turns to David for help.

As the courtroom drama unfolds, previously unconnected areas of Helena’s life collide, and she finally finds the absolution she needs to let go.

Unsaid is author Neil Abramson’s debut, and it’s amazing! Abramson has deftly crafted a world peopled with characters that I cared for deeply from the first page. The story is compelling, and the tension of the trial is nearly unbearable. *Unsaid* was not an easy read, but it is a must-read for all animal lovers! Just be sure to keep the tissue handy.

The heart of this novel is the beautiful exploration of the relationship between humans and animals. Abramson forces his readers to consider the huge responsibility that humans carry for the treatment of the animals that share our world. Readers will contemplate the possibility that we are not the only species possessing the capacity to experience fear, humor, pain, joy and love.



Heather Holley-Hall is the Head of Branch Libraries with Alamance County Public Libraries. She may be reached at 336-570-6730 or hhall@alamancelibraries.org.