



Book Excerpt

Nancy Pickard's mystery novel, *The Virgin of Small Plains*, has been well-received since its initial publication in April, 2006. It was named to the 2007 Kansas Notable Books List, and was selected in 2008 as the one-book/one-state title for 2009 Kansas Reads...*The Virgin of Small Plains*.

In the dead of winter, murder in a hoary pasture near the small fictional town of Small Plains, Kansas, in the Flint Hills rips through the usually slow-paced rural community. The frozen body of a young girl is found in the snow by Sheriff Nathan Shellenberger and his sons. Two decades later, some of the prominent citizens of the small town strive to keep the truth hidden, but magically the mystery is solved.

The Virgin of Small Plains

Chapter 1

Abby Reynolds braked her truck on the icy highway, startled by what she imagined she saw off to the side of the road. That can't be, she thought, as she squinted into the snow, trying to see more clearly. When the wind blew an opening in the blizzard, Abby realized that it was not a hallucination. It was not an impossible illusion sketched on the early morning air by the gusting snow. It was...*good grief!*...it was Nadine Newquist in a bathrobe, surrounded by swirling white, struggling through drifts on the old cemetery road, as if she were determined to visit a particular grave on this particular morning.

My God! It was Nadine: the judge's wife, Mitch's mom, Abby's own late mother's lifelong friend. It really was Nadine, a woman who was sixty-three years old and speeding toward early Alzheimer's at about the same rate that Abby's pickup truck was sliding sideways on Highway 177.

What the *hell* was Nadine doing out there?

She was all by herself, in a bathrobe, for God's sake, in a blizzard...

Abby pumped her brakes with a light touch of her foot, didn't slam on them like a fool, but her truck started to spin anyway, going round and round on the two-lane blacktop like a two-ton skater on ice.

She let her steering wheel alone, waiting for it to stop spinning before she touched it again. Coffee sloshed out of her lidless thermal cup in its holder by her knee; the smell of it filled the cab of her truck. She could still taste her last sip of it, along with the fruit and cereal she'd had for breakfast—all of which was now threatening to come back up her throat.

With a shudder, the truck came out of the spin and started sliding sideways again, skidding in a long diagonal across the yellow line into the eastbound lane. A heavy drift of snow slowed it down and changed the direction of the slide, until it was going backward. The skid went on and on, picking up speed as it backed into the crest of a rise, then dropped again, taking the bottom of Abby's stomach with it. And still the truck stayed on the pavement, hemmed un by snow, avoiding the shoulders, the deep culverts, the barbed wire fencing beyond. People thought Kansas was flat, but it wasn't, and especially not in the heart of the Flint Hills. The roads in this part of the state were long and straight, but they soared up and plunged down like curved ribbons of hard taffy.

-- From *The Virgin of Small Plains* by Nancy Pickard. Ballantine Books: April 2006.