

## CREATIVE TOUCH LIFTS DOMESTIC DRAMA IN `AWAKE': [THIRD EDITION]

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Book Review Awake

By Elizabeth Graver Holt, 285 pp., \$23

In this, Elizabeth Graver's third novel, a 42-year-old wife and mother of two sons is feeling oppressed and ill-nourished in her life, and so she has a passionate affair with the director of her son's summer camp. They go at it with gusto for a while. At the last possible moment for her marriage, she is stricken with doubt at the prospect of discarding her settled life.

How is a novelist to make this plot, this wedge of well-aged cheese, seem fresh? Graver does so by means of a special fact about this family, this camp. Anna and Ian Simon's 9-year-old younger son, Max, suffers a genetic flaw - xeroderma pigmentosum - that makes him dangerously vulnerable to ultraviolet light, to daylight, in other words. Camp Luna in the Adirondacks, run by the charismatic widower Hal, who has an XP child himself, is the family's controlled place of refuge and release for a couple of summers. Camp Luna's windows are sealed against ultraviolet light, and most activities take place by night.

The novel proceeds along two tracks. One is the experience of parents and a family coping with a rare, incurable disease: its straining effects, in this case, on Anna and Ian's 14-year marriage, and on Max's

healthy older brother, Adam, a vigorous soccer player. Along the way, we learn much about the very real and terrible disease, with only a thousand known cases. Most of its victims do not reach adulthood because of cancers or other insidious accompanying maladies. Max was diagnosed early, and is not one of the most dire cases.

The second track is the course of Anna's struggle with the hand life has dealt her, and with herself. She is the narrator and, though she never tires of herself as a subject, is not easy for the reader to get to know, in large part because she is so beset by uncertainties and moderate depression. She is strongly bonded with Max, to the point where Ian fears she is hindering the boy from growing up.

Anna as a narrator has a habit of posing rhetorical questions, which she does not, and the reader cannot, answer about her desires, feelings, motivations, and their significance. "But what if the mother gets an itch, a yen?" she asks in a typical passage. "What if she tires of the tending, loses faith in the healing, needs a break? . . . What if the mother, who for years has checked and checked and checked her sick boy's skin, watches the boy run off with his new friends and starts to notice her own skin again, the way it keens for something, wants? What if she finds herself split down the middle?" It's as if she's constantly asking us to explain her to herself.

Anna's self-absorption seems to eclipse the other characters. She frequently stops to look back at her childhood and youth. She loves her sons, though is understandably focused on Max, and maintains a wistful affection for her husband. Yet they are at most sketches, props in her one-woman show. They speak, but their speech tends to be cryptic, and does not reveal much about their inner selves. Anna does not give any sign of understanding her husband, lover, or children, and does not know their deepest longings, nor do we.

She is intelligent and articulate, and wants to protect her loved ones. And when she has acted out her raw desires and fantasies, she knows enough to see the poor promise of her dreams of new life, a life in the daylight with a man she barely knows. She had been in the habit of living by night, as Max does. But things are distorted in low light, and the Latin word for moon, "luna," is also the root of the word "lunacy."

There is a risk in such a work, with esoteric knowledge at its center, that such knowledge might bear too much thematic burden, like the whaling in "Moby-Dick." At times "Awake" seems like a novel about a disease, and the agonies of families who must cope with it. Would there be enough here for a novel without XP, as Anna might ask, in the way that character and relationships in the Patrick O'Brian novels hold up even with all the nautical and martial esoterica?

The answer is yes, inasmuch as Anna's dilemmas and actions are archetypal, and her ultimate decision, when it comes, so unexpected and moving. Some moments and crossroads in life we never tire of reading about. Not the commonplace affair itself, but the confusions that take place where reasons conflict with Reason, crepuscular logic with diurnal facts. Anna's actions have reasons, and we can see them, as she fumbles with all her rhetorical questions to sort them out. The tension is between that circle of reasons and the larger framework of

adult Reason, the lesser operating uneasily within the greater.

As much as Max, Anna is struggling to escape the prison of her own skin.

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