

An honest look at the sacrifices of parenting

Beth Kephart Beth Kephart's fourth nonfiction book, "Seeing Past Z: Nurturing the Imagination in a Fast . Chicago Tribune ; Chicago, Ill. [Chicago, Ill]. 04 Apr 2004: 14.1.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In her urgent and remarkable third novel, "Awake," [Elizabeth Graver] draws her readers into a world in which such questions must be answered. Her protagonist is Anna, a former painter with a history of wanderlust who finds herself now, in her early 40s, the mother of two boys, one 13, the other 9. Adam, her first-born, is slightly complicated and increasingly secretive. Max, the younger, is afflicted with xeroderma pigmentosum, words, as Anna tells us, that are "twisty, warty, on your tongue. . . . Flawed DNA repair system. Hypersensitivity to ultraviolet light. Skin cancer, eye cancer, at a thousand times the normal rate. Only a thousand known cases worldwide. The X moves into your house. The P moves in. You gather up the facts, gather up the children."

FULL TEXT

FICTION.

Awake

By Elizabeth Graver

Holt, 289 pages, \$23

It's the vulnerability of children that so mercilessly haunts parents. The way their hunger depends on our ability to feed them. The way their bodies are ours to lift out of harm's way. The way it is up to us to hear the cry, and to know the answer, and to try to do what's right. "Depend on me," we say to our children. And then we must summon all we never guessed we'd have to summon so that we might depend upon ourselves.

Our attention strays. We doubt and panic. We do the wrong thing, and then: What kind of parent are we? What sort of person have we become? What does grace look like in the face of failure? How do we know who we are and what we want when a child is carried home in our arms?

In her urgent and remarkable third novel, "Awake," Elizabeth Graver draws her readers into a world in which such questions must be answered. Her protagonist is Anna, a former painter with a history of wanderlust who finds herself now, in her early 40s, the mother of two boys, one 13, the other 9. Adam, her first-born, is slightly complicated and increasingly secretive. Max, the younger, is afflicted with xeroderma pigmentosum, words, as Anna tells us, that are "twisty, warty, on your tongue. . . . Flawed DNA repair system. Hypersensitivity to ultraviolet light. Skin cancer, eye cancer, at a thousand times the normal rate. Only a thousand known cases worldwide. The X moves into your house. The P moves in. You gather up the facts, gather up the children."

A child with XP can tolerate no exposure to daylight. Windows must be masked. Signs must be taped to front doors warning any stoppersby to give the child inside time to hide from the crack of coming sun. Days are flipped

on their ends, so that life begins at night and the neighborhood is explored beneath the moon. Since Max's difference was finally diagnosed, Anna has lived in his darkness, forfeiting light for motherhood.

And forfeiting, she has begun to suspect, so much more. She has hardly painted since Max was born, for isn't painting so dependent upon all those variables of light? She has lost touch with friends, for who could understand her life? She has lost the way she had lived with her husband, Ian, when it was just them, and then just them and Adam—all of them hikers and travelers, all of them greedy for the taste and smell of the outdoors.

But it isn't until Anna and her family spend three weeks at a special summer camp designed for families with children who have XP that all the fragile balancing acts by which they've all lived their constrained lives begin to crack and topple. Run by a charismatic widower, a haven for those who must live the night, Camp Luna seems at first like a paradise, a place where Anna and Ian and Adam and Max can fill their lungs, then exhale. Adam finds a girlfriend there. Ian relaxes with other campers. Max can run off in the darkness and play with kids who are so much like him. Anna, for her part, can walk, emote and see. She can go off on trails to mountaintops and watch the play of light in trees.

She can want.

Such freedom is exhilarating. Such freedom is a danger. Such freedom sets too many questions in sudden, catalyzing, churning, anxious motion. All at once, Anna is vigilantly aware of all she used to be: A young girl who bucked against her mother's suburban cautions. A college student who loved her unshackled life. A traveler in Europe who chose an edgy, dangerous life. A woman who'd once made passionate love to the man who is now more like her roommate.

Where did that Anna go? she wants to know. How much of oneself can anyone reasonably be asked to snuff out, neglect, leave behind? What is she going to do with her newfound freedom? What is she going to do about the charismatic camp founder, Hal, who watches her and appeals to her and represents, perhaps, a way back to herself?

Superbly crafted, intensely involving, "Awake" is a psychological drama, a thoroughly credible examination of a woman in conversation with herself. Graver's Anna is complex and impatient, never shrill, neither entirely self-pitying nor self-castrating. Telling the story in a first-person past tense, Anna's narrative has a bruised, unsettled quality, a certain woundedness that is fresh and unresolved, ambiguous, still. Her life is not what she thought her life would be. She has made mistakes. Were they inevitable? Does she even know what is right, looking back on things now? Can she know, by telling herself her own story? Can she delineate between right and wrong if she asks herself the truest questions?

"Is it possible to be unhappy for a long time and never know it? Or is unhappiness a distorting lens you train back on your life once you're standing in a whole new place? The camp, I knew, was supposed to have given us a respite from the real world. It was meant to be a sanctuary, an adventure, a break. I feel so rested and refreshed, a better, a more grateful, graceful person might have written to a friend. Camp Luna was a gift."

In her acknowledgments at the end of the book, Graver writes that she began this novel before she was pregnant with her first child and completed it less than a year after her second child was born— facts that deepened my already profound admiration for "Awake." For Graver writes like a woman who has mothered for a long time, like a parent who has lived parenting long and thoroughly enough to map and weigh and look behind its countless innuendos, permutations, implications. We are taken right out to the edge of ourselves when we parent, and when

things get harder than they are supposed to be, we are taken another step beyond that. There are no easy answers, and Graver gives us none. She gives us, instead, a story that feels real, lived in and honest.

Illustration

PHOTOS 2; Caption: PHOTO (color): Tribune photo illustration. PHOTO (color): (Book cover.)

Credit: Forward World," is due out in June She has just finished her first novel, "The Drowning Girl"

DETAILS

Subject:	Novels; Books-titles -- Awake
People:	Graver, Elizabeth
Publication title:	Chicago Tribune; Chicago, Ill.
Pages:	14.1
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2004
Publication date:	Apr 4, 2004
Section:	Books
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Chicago, Ill.
Country of publication:	United States, Chicago, Ill.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	10856 706
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Book Review-Favorable
ProQuest document ID:	420094379
Document URL:	https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/honest-look-at-sacrifices-parenting/docview/420094379/se-2?accountid=9673

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Last updated: 2017-11-14

Database: Chicago Tribune

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