

BOOK REVIEW

‘The End of the Point’ by Elizabeth Graver

By Jan Stuart March 2, 2013, 6:00 p.m.



Elizabeth Graver, author of "The End of the Point."

There are no end of frolicsome children and fretful parents in “The End of the Point,” Elizabeth Graver’s beautifully orchestrated family symphony in four movements, with prelude. The children who frolic through the first section evolve in the second into freaked-out grown-ups with their own children, who mature into malcontent teenagers with serious issues, who then go on in the finale to become adjusted adults with fretful and frolicsome children of their own.

Should you be feeling maxed-out on multigenerational family sagas, please reconsider. With her fourth and most emotionally textured novel, Graver proves herself a master chronicler of the ever-spiraling human comedy. “The End of the Point” is a work of uncommon gracefulness, as much in its boundless empathy as in the luminosity of its prose.

The thorny alliance between children and their parents (mothers, in particular) threads throughout Graver’s notably disparate novels, whose young protagonists are made to run gauntlets of a singularly challenging order. In the 19th-century-set “Unraveling,” a willful New England girl overrides her mother’s objections to work in a mill, only to find herself pregnant and ostracized at 16. The citified 11-year-old protagonist of “The Honey Thief” acts out after her father’s death by serial shoplifting and is whisked away by her addled mom into rural solitude. In “Awake,” the travails of a young boy with a light-sensitivity disorder are compounded when his mother embarks upon an adulterous affair with his camp leader.

If the sisters Porter in “The End of the Point” face any obstacles at all, it is that they are comparably freed from obstacles. The cosseted Helen, Dossy, and Janie bear the burden of an extraordinary legacy: Descended from Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford, the book traces their summers at their parents’ beloved retreat on Buzzards Bay, a property that has presumably been in the family since their storied forebear stepped off the Mayflower and purchased the peninsula from the Indians.

The Porters are accustomed to prevailing, and they stubbornly remain on the Point in the summer of '42, when most of their neighbors have ceded their homes to a pop-up Army base. Their spirited eldest child, Charlie, has already decamped to another military posting; his absence, which will reverberate throughout the novel, signals an irreversible disruption in a household and a community long impervious to change.

Six transitional decades of the Porters' history are related in three sections by a different character, each of whom does quiet battle with change, embracing it in one heartbeat and pushing against it with the next. The first, elegiac World War II section is relayed via Janie's good-humored nurse, Bea, who had the pluck to abandon her native Scotland but has grown so devoted to her young charge that she is torn when a love-smitten Army officer (named Smitty) presents a chance to break away and create her own family.

Graver infuses this wartime section with passages of smoky lyricism, as when Smitty trails Bea out of a Saturday night dance at the Army base. "There was the sentry, slow dancing with his gun; he gave it a loud, smacking kiss as they passed."

The author renders Bea so credible and disarming that we feel initially dismayed when the narrative mantle is passed, in epistolary fashion, to Janie's incorrigible older sister Helen (a.k.a. Hellion), whom Bea actively dislikes. By 1947, Helen is a Seven Sisters slacker reinventing herself at the University of Lausanne and again, years later, as a mother going for her MA at Columbia.

Her manipulative letters home from Europe reek of entitlement and hauteur, qualities that ripen in her 30s into an admirable nerviness, as she separates herself from an ill-fitting familial role. Like Bea, Helen has jumped far from the nest and circumscribed her own path, albeit, with a little help from analysis.

The collateral damage of Helen's break from convention is later felt in her teenage son, Charlie, who by 1970 has emerged from a troubled childhood to become an emotionally detached rebel in search of a cause, rejecting his elite-boarding-school track yet unable to make the leap into the peacenik activism of his peers. He idles at the Point, erecting stone

walls that speak of both his social disengagement and a need to shore up his environment against encroaching shifts.

Graver limns her characters' strivings with an acuity at once poetic and anthropologic. If we feel rueful that Helen's and Charlie's turbulent narratives end up sidelining the more mundane trajectories traversed by Janie and Dossy, that might reflect our own closet desire to reverse the clock to a time, say 1942, when life choices and family roles seemed simpler, if not preordained. As the young Helen writes when her future dangles in the balance, "I would like to stay just where I am, or go backwards." Her words strike a chord of wistful ambivalence that resounds throughout this lovely novel and echoes beyond its final page.

Jan Stuart is author of "The Nashville Chronicles: The Making of Robert Altman's Masterpiece." He can be reached at jan.stuart7@gmail.com.

[Show comments](#)
