

# Full House

By Alida Becker

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Late in Elizabeth Graver's eloquent new novel, a therapist warns a very troubled young man against what he calls the "geographic" cure: "You can't fix yourself by going somewhere else. . . . You'll always take yourself along." The young man, convinced that his family's summer home on the coast of Massachusetts is the only place he has ever been happy, instantly bristles. "Ashaunt," Charlie insists, isn't "somewhere else." By now, having occupied this windswept spit of land along with the Porters from World War II through Vietnam, Graver's readers will be inclined to agree. It is indeed special, sometimes almost magical. But we also realize, having come to know the other lives entangled with Charlie's, that Ashaunt's spell can involve something much more complex than a dearly held childhood attachment, that a house like this, where "everyone could be together and so tight," can also feel "vise tight, tight enough to blow a fuse." The therapist may be right. Wherever they go, Graver's characters will carry Ashaunt along, but its look and feel will be different for each of them, colored by the emotions they inhabit just as intimately as they do its drafty rooms and sandy footpaths.

Graver's past fiction has been enriched by its roots in the landscapes of upstate New York and New England, by her lush descriptions of the natural world. In "The End of the Point," her fourth novel, she uses that skill to appeal to the nostalgia of anyone with fond memories of escaping to a seaside refuge that has a "salt air rush," a spot where the pages of books immediately turn limp and cherished rituals (the morning walk, the afternoon swim, the pause to watch the sunset) are punctuated by hours and hours of the freedom to do anything, or nothing. Yet even as she's drawing us in, Graver is subtly reminding us how much this picture depends on what we choose to see — and not see.

The reader arrives with the Porters in 1942, at the beginning of a holiday season when few other civilians are in evidence and the end of the point has been turned into a military installation. Instead of the old dirt track, there's a paved road leading to a high wooden gate guarded by sentries and, beyond it, makeshift barracks and a tower for spotting enemy aircraft. Many years later, this looming eyesore will have become a landmark, its destruction lamented, but now it's just another thing for the Porters to grumble about, even as they turn their gazes to what remains an unimpeded view of the ocean.



Elizabeth Graver Joanna Eldredge Morrissey

The wealthy Porters take pride in their ownership of a good part of the point, yet it's Bea, a Scottish nanny, who gives us our first glimpses of Ashaunt. At 36, she is possessed of very little except her consuming devotion to 8-year-old Janie, the youngest of the Porters' three daughters, and to the memory of her own beloved mother, whose death prompted Bea's journey across the ocean. Bea's hesitant romance with an American soldier provides most of the drama in these opening pages, as she's forced to choose between a last chance to create her own family and an abiding reluctance to abandon the upstairs-downstairs clan that has already claimed her loyalty. Soon, though, the eldest Porter daughter, Helen, a pretentious, intellectually precocious 16-year-old during that significant summer, will elbow Bea aside, taking command of the narrative through postwar letters and diary entries that pull her and Ashaunt along to the early 1960s — only to be overshadowed, a decade later, by her son Charlie, named for the ebullient aviator uncle who died, at age 21, on a combat mission in Italy during World War II.

Oppressed by his mother's impossibly high hopes for him, made fragile by disastrous collegiate experiments with drugs, Charlie is haunted by another war, incarnated in the person of Jerry Silva, a shellshocked Vietnam vet with his own volatile stake in the future of the land. Jerry's 40 acres, brambly and wild, where he camps in the squalid remains of a milk truck on an abandoned farm inherited from his Portuguese-American father, look very different from the faux-rustic cabin on the family compound at Ashaunt, paid for by Charlie's aristocratic grandmother, where he reads Thoreau and dreams of sabotaging the developer surveying the old military base for an upscale subdivision. Charlie envisions the land as a nature preserve; Jerry is determined to combat "the military-industrial golfplex." If they lose this skirmish, will they have lost the war?

That question will be answered as the novel draws to a close in the late 1990s. The central cast remains the same, but time has altered them, as it has Ashaunt. Charlie isn't the only member of the Porter family who has struggled with mental illness. Others have fought long battles with cancer. There have been slow deaths and sudden departures, many joyous births and even, in one of the novel's most affecting scenes, a furtive visit to an abortionist. Social barriers have eroded; personal priorities have altered. Met early on, Charlie's great-grandmother is serenely secure both as a matriarch, deigning to chat with "the Help," and as the author of

genteel nature handbooks, rounding up the children for instructive walks along the beach and through the marshes. Two generations later, Charlie's mother, torn between her determination to earn her doctorate at Columbia, to be respected as a historian, and her guilty sense of maternal obligation to an increasingly large family, finds that visits to Ashaunt make her feel "more than ever two people instead of one." But by the next generation another of the family's wives, her career matter-of-factly accepted by everyone, will spend her own visit to Ashaunt preoccupied by her failure to conceive a child.

Graver has said that she wanted to use "The End of the Point" to see "how mothers or caregivers form (or deform) children" and how a "place can itself serve as a kind of second mother." She gives this exploration depth through small gestures (a mother and a nanny who "almost never touched now that there was no baby to pass back and forth") and through sweeping observations ("To call the scene plain does not quite catch its essence," Helen remarks, visiting her brother's grave in a field of white crosses near Bologna. "It's almost nothing, but nothing multiplied and multiplied"). Most of all, though, Graver's engaging, expansive storytelling allows us to take up residence inside the minds of a host of different characters, watching as they create their own pictures of the world around them, as they invest certain places and people with mythic significance. "Only nature can hold me," one of them declares, "in its obliviousness to all that consumes me," particularly "the sea that gives us the illusion, at least, of timelessness." Small wonder, then, that this same character, despite being in intense pain, despite knowing that death is rapidly approaching, can still announce that at Ashaunt, "I'm having the best summer of my life."

#### **THE END OF THE POINT**

By Elizabeth Graver

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Alida Becker is an editor at the Book Review.

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