

A novel of parent-child love, dogged by past pain: [City Edition]

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THE HONEY THIEF By Elizabeth Graver. Hyperion. 261 pp. \$22.95. Andy Solomon, professor of English at the University of Tampa, has just completed a book about a cross-country motorcycle tour with his son.

From Sue Miller to Ann Beattie to Jane Hamilton, contemporary writers ask: How can we be a good parent in our perilous times? In "The Honey Thief," her fearlessly honest second novel, Boston author Elizabeth Graver begins fulfilling the high promise of her 1997 debut, "Unravelling," to explore the dilemma of modern parenthood and the dislocated lives of Miriam and Eva Baruch.

After the third time 11-year-old Eva gets caught shoplifting, her widowed mother, Miriam, decides the only hope of curing Eva's kleptomania lies in moving them both out of Manhattan and upstate to Ithaca, with its promise and perils of a clean slate. There, Miriam finds work as a paralegal, leaving Eva in the summertime care of a sluggish woman who watches soaps but not Eva.

So the bored preadolescent bikes about the new countryside hoping to salve her loneliness. She comes upon an unattended roadside stand bearing several jars of honey. In her pocket is enough money to pay for honey, but she needs to steal, not buy. Theft keeps at bay her inner demons: "How empty, how furious her hands had felt before she filled them, how jagged her thoughts until her fist closed hard around an object and the world smoothed out."

Having suffered more than her share of abandonment, Eva finds in shoplifting what some girls do in bulimia -- a means of gaining a small measure of control in a powerless life, a way to prevent abandonment by the only one she has left: "The objects she took were always different, but the thought was always more or less the same: her mother hurt, her mother dead, her mother hurt and dead. Somehow, taking the thing could kill the thought, and there was the real world again, crisp and clear; there was Eva -- a girl with a mother."

Her mother knows of the stealing but not of the motive. As in her first novel, Graver shows extraordinary perception in depicting the multilayered, inherently complex mother-daughter relationship. At 11, that means needing a mother but pushing her away, wanting to be understood but communicating in shouts, accusations, and that most comforting weapon in the preteen arsenal, sarcasm.

Miriam has her own concerns: finding a job, learning to drive, hoping to start some semblance of a life. Her gravest concern, though, she fears to share with her daughter. It may explain the kleptomania. It does explain why Eva has no father. When Miriam first met Francis, as we learn in flashbacks, his oddity seemed attractive: a city kid who knew the names of all the trees and birds, a painter, a jazz pianist, a bilingual, avid reader, and, best of all, after Eva's birth a wonderfully attentive father. No need to worry about his fanatical mother who "thinks every day is her own exclusive date with Jesus Christ" or his hints about mental lapses in his college days.

An infant often provides a touchstone that reveals the true condition of a marriage. But newborn Eva also makes clear about her father that "the world was coming apart inside his head." Suddenly, his parental caution moves across the border into paranoia. He grows violently psychotic and is institutionalized. When he is finally sent home, Francis, diagnosed as having a bipolar disorder, will be on lithium for the rest of his life. And Miriam had to fear that one of the two people she loved most might harm the other.

Miriam has found no way to tell Eva that her stealing may stem from this disorder that runs in families, or that her father's fatal heart attack when she was 6 resulted from an intentional overdose of lithium.

Nor has the uprooted Eva told her mother she has made a friend, a 42-year-old beekeeper named Burl, whose honey she stole, who faces his own isolation and uncertainty. They find comfort in each other's presence, as Burl teaches Eva the intricacies of beekeeping, which will lead to the plot's crisis.

The real crises, though, exist in each character's interior, making the novel's energy more potential than kinetic, a lack of external action that may frustrate some readers. The most dramatic event, Francis's behavioral meltdown, occurs a decade before the main story.

Graver's interest actually lies in creating a faithful study of the

adjustment of three people we come to care about, each of whose lives is a bit off-center. She does this with admirable maturity and skill. In tight, confident prose, Graver provides a wealth of vividly observed detail that makes us feel completely there with Miriam, Eva, and Burl, through whose interwoven viewpoints the novel is told.

We feel Eva's hand as Burl shakes it, "startled by the firmness of her grasp; he could have been shaking hands with a grown man except that her palm was so small." We even feel Graver mining her own memory for sensual recollections as Eva recalls her father: "Other bits surfaced in her mind now and then: the fuzz of her mitten against his leather glove; his palms cupping her knees when he held her on his shoulders."

Often, Graver's details form cogent metaphors, like these conflicting images of the two sides of nurturance: a neighbor soothing infant Eva by snuggling her tight in a blanket ("She has too much room, that's all. She wants to feel cozy.") and Burl telling Eva that "for the bees to do well, you had to leave them alone."

The most central metaphoric image, though, occurs when Eva speaks with Miriam one morning and "nodded, watching her mother watch her in the mirror," for it reveals the heart of the complexity in raising a same-sex child: the mirroring, the countless ways, for good and ill, parent and child see themselves in the other.

That is what Graver evokes constantly here, with no pat ending or easy answers but admirable talent and truth: the sense that in raising a child we get the chance to improve upon ourself.

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