

ELIZABETH GRAVER'S LATEST STORY OF A YOUNG TROUBLED, TWISTING JOURNEY TO ADULTHOOD

John Gregory Brown John Gregory Brown's most recent novel is "The Wrecked, Blessed Body of Shelton LaFleur" . Chicago Tribune ; Chicago, Ill. [Chicago, Ill]. 12 Sep 1999: 4.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

(Elizabeth) Graver's setting this time is a contemporary one. Eleven-year-old Eva and her mother have fled Manhattan for life in a small town in upstate New York. They've apparently left on account of Eva's penchant for shoplifting, which has her mother worried. Gradually, we learn--as Eva eventually will--that her mother's real worry is that Eva carries the genetic imprint of her father, a father who was mentally ill and five years earlier died of a heart attack after taking an overdose of his medication.

FULL TEXT

FICTION.

THE HONEY THIEF

By Elizabeth Graver

Hyperion, 263 pages, \$22.95

It's not surprising that so many fiction writers are enthralled by childhood, which offers such exquisite emotional terrain: mystery and wonder, doubt and confusion and longing, an apparently aimless wandering that is in fact a purposeful journey toward adulthood.

Elizabeth Graver is rapidly proving herself one of our finest writers on the grand drama of simply growing up. In her first novel, "Unravelling," Graver told the story of a 15-year-old girl who, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, leaves her family's New Hampshire farm to take a job at a cloth factory in the city. She becomes an outcast--as so many of literature's children are--and Graver presents the girl's harrowing and often painful progress with such tenderness and insight that the convincing 19th Century setting of the novel serves as a mere backdrop for its affecting examination of adolescence.

In her new novel, "The Honey Thief," Graver once again presents the story of a young girl's painful maturation, and once again she has produced a quiet gem of a book, a beautifully executed portrayal of longing and loss and renewal.

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genetic imprint of her father, a father who was mentally ill and five years earlier died of a heart attack after taking an overdose of his medication.

Miriam, Eva's mother, has never told Eva the truth about her father's death. And Eva has never managed to explain to her mother that her shoplifting has a great deal less to do with mental illness than with her reasonable fear that she will lose her mother as well, that she will be cut adrift in a world far too complicated for her to manage on her own.

But Eva already feels cut adrift in this new town, her best friend left behind in Manhattan, and she finds only a bland amusement in setting off on her bicycle to explore the countryside. When Eva happens upon an untended honey stand and the nearby hives, however, her new life begins to take shape.

"At first she didn't know what they were, these big wooden boxes on cinder blocks, painted gray or white and stacked on top of one another. . . . The rain was coming down faster now, making it hard to see, but as she got closer, she noticed darting shapes and saw that the ledge at the bottom of each stack was specked with crawling bees. A bee flew toward her, its buzzing loud enough to hear, and she flinched and stepped away. . . . She moved forward again, hoping to find a way to look into a hive, but another bee flew angrily in front of her, then looped off."

Eva's interest in these bees, her desire to see for herself the mysterious machinations of the hive, to glimpse the queen at its heart, becomes the novel's central metaphor for Eva's frightening and sometimes hazardous path toward understanding herself and the lives that have shaped her own.

Eva steals a couple of jars of honey but then is befriended by Burl, the beekeeper, whose companionship and guidance are threatening to Miriam but blessedly welcome to Eva. Although the novel shifts between Eva's, Miriam's and Burl's points of view, it is Eva who stands at the novel's center and holds our greatest interest, as if Graver intends to show us through these adult characters the ways in which life remains mysterious and complex long after our childhoods are done, the ways in which our frailties and failings of character continue to haunt us throughout our lives.

And when Eva decides to explore a hive on her own, to place a recently delivered queen in a new home, we understand why the causes and consequences of her actions resonate for the novel's characters far beyond the physical harm Eva endures.

"The Honey Thief" is, in the end, a work of redemption--again, as literature's stories concerning childhood often are--and Graver's portrayal of that redemption is measured and convincing, suggesting that while Eva's struggles for understanding and emotional maturity are ultimately rewarded, the process is a painful one.

"(H)ope worked better," Eva tells herself in the middle of the novel, "if you hoped for tiny things." Although Graver's novels examine such matters as hope--and its attendant perils and rewards-- on a small scale, their author's vision is magnificently detailed and precise, offering readers a memorable and sustained glimpse of the mysterious machinations of life itself.

Illustration

PHOTO GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO (color): (Book cover.) GRAPHIC (color): (Beehive.)

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