FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

A Private Sorcery
Lisa Gornick
Algonquin Books
978-1-56512-341-0
(October 14, 2002)

Psychiatrist Saul Dubinsky, a gentle soul in a skinny body, buries his anguish in prescription drugs after a patient attempts suicide. Self-medication leads to addiction, which leads to crime. The book begins with his arrest, but it is not his story.

Rather, this insightful first novel focuses on how Saul's conviction and prison sentence transform his wife, Rena, and his father, Leonard. Saul spends most of the book offstage, a rarely glimpsed catalyst serving out his time as those closest to him stumble toward self-understanding. For Rena, that means dismantling her life and constructing a new one out of spare parts, all the while reflecting on her girlhood, a time "when her life was scrappy and sordid, every corner filled with shame." Leonard, a psychiatrist who hasn't treated patients in decades and whose life consists mostly of waiting on his invalid (by choice) wife, finds in his son's troubles further reason to engage in what he does best-agonize about his own actions and motives.

In this passage, he dwells on how he and his son ceased discussing the patient's suicide attempt: "I stopped asking. Behaved as if it was not on your mind while knowing all the while that it was. Did I think that by asking I would be encouraging you to remain bound up with the boy and that by not asking I was in some way spurring you to let go?"

The author holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Yale University and is a graduate and faculty member of the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research; her short stories have appeared in a variety of literary journals. She plays with psychological theories in A Private Sorcery, using her psychiatrist main character as a device for raising them, though not without skepticism.

Gornick's voice is not showy. Its power comes from its simplicity-and from her knack for finding the surprising but apt description. Despite the dramatic opening scene, plot is not this book's strong point. Much of what happens is internal-especially with the bafflingly inert

Leonard-or a recollection of the past. Toward the end, when the plot's pace speeds up, the outside action feels less real than the characters'
thoughts and feelings. Through the crisis, father and daughter-in-law bond-haltingly, awkwardly, but with an authenticity found in the best memoirs. Where this book excels is in its unsentimental but warm-hearted portrayal of damaged people simultaneously looking inward and reaching out to find the makings of a happy family in unlikely material.

Karen Holt