

Finding Bluefield

Elan Barnehama

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Of all the diners, in all of the world: when Barbara crosses the street for lunch on a brief break from hospital rounds, the last thing she expects is to find love. But there Nicky is, vivaciously pulling Barbara into conversation over an exquisite piece of blackberry pie. Elan Barnehama's debut novel begins in the Virginia of the sixties, in the midst of Kennedy's campaign and as the civil rights movement is heating up, and traces Barbara and Nicky's relationship across two decades. Friendship blossoms into a relationship on the night of Kennedy's victory, and in a few short turns, the couple is devout.

Only their orientation pushes them to the margins, forcing them to mitigate their social interactions in consideration of small-town Southern expectations. When their desire to expand their nascent family inspires Nicky to chance a pregnancy during MLK's march on Washington, they find themselves grappling with challenges few new parents have to consider. All Barbara and Nicky want is a normal existence for themselves and baby Paul. Instead, the three find themselves running from the town Nicky had hoped to grow old in, driven away by gossip and the threat of the legal custodial removal of Nicky's son.

They make a new home in upstate New York and they get to know neighbors Susan and Abe, whose friendship becomes like a second salvation. Social mores change, and they find the life they've carved out to be an increasingly comfortable one. Paul poses, and faces, standard questions about his parents and his paternity, and a health scare causes Barbara to consider her legal rights, but these challenges are well managed. Only shocking news from Bluefield really jars them from their day-to-day. In looking back, Barbara and Nicky are made to reconsider what home really means.

Barnehama's characters are a sympathetic and roundly likeable bunch. He makes easy heroes of those who face, and gracefully route, general prejudices. LGBT issues are, naturally, at the fore, but severe racial and religious discrimination also make a play. That the central relationship often comes off as idyllic may therefore surprise the reader. These pages seek to do the dual work of detailing the difficulty of life at the margins, while highlighting how normal those unfairly relegated actually are, and the results don't always feel natural. *Finding Bluefield* nonetheless makes affecting arguments for work toward a more just world. An agreeable and earnest novel which highlights the innate humanity of the families which society sometimes forgets to honor.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January 4, 2013)

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