

Fire Exit

Morgan Talty

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A recovering alcoholic considers what to do about his family's secrets in Morgan Talty's affecting novel *Fire Exit*.

Charles was raised on the Penobscot Island Indian Reservation by his Native American stepfather, but that doesn't matter to the government: they only care that the blood in Charles's veins is not Indigenous. This simple yet irrevocable fact affects every stage of his life, from where he can live to the relationship he can have with his daughter, Elizabeth. A perpetual outsider in his own community, Charles believes that telling the truth is the only way to heal his troubled daughter, but his insistence could end up doing everyone more harm than good.

Charles is torn between worrying for his mother, stolen away by dementia at a piece by piece rate, and for Elizabeth, who is struggling with something he can only speculate about based on the glimpses he steals of her from across the river that separates their homes. When he does get to meet Elizabeth at last, she proves abrasive, insensitive to everyone, and all too cognizant of the distance that a lifetime of secrecy has created between her and her biological father.

Charles's sense of helplessness is conveyed through direct, evocative prose. Despite his convictions, he faces the fact that while blood may not matter between people who love each other, it still dictates what others think and what dangers lurk inside the mind, passed down from one generation to the next. In the tense climax, a painful part of Charles's history threatens to repeat itself. He risks all that he has left to save Elizabeth—and to get a second chance at having a family.

In the thought-provoking novel *Fire Exit*, family and identity are so much more than what is in the blood or on a piece of paper.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2024)

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