

Gabriel's Daughters

Janet Kay Jensen

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Gabriel's Daughters is a lovely and optimistic story about the uncrushable nature of women's spirituality.

Janet Kay Jensen's *Gabriel's Daughters* is the imaginative tale of a young girl who breaks away from the expectations of her rigid religious community to live a life with more possibilities.

At sixteen, Zina knows that her artistic dreams will have to be put on hold soon so that she can marry Cyrus, a friend of her father's. But Zina is resistant to the prescriptions of her polygamous Utah community and craves a future full of passion. Her ambivalence leaves her vulnerable to the sweet-talking of a handsome young Gentile teacher. At risk of communal exile, she flees into the wider world, where she must challenge all of her taught notions of right and wrong.

The narrative pits polygamist traditions against more welcoming Christian belief systems, from the emotive Protestant church where Zina first finds refuge to a more modern articulation of Mormonism than that she first knew. Zina is not the only woman from Gabriel's Landing to question how she was raised; two sisters also resist the roles assigned to them. Moments devoted to their barrier-breaking are fascinating in the text, which openly celebrates women's dreams without insisting that they must abandon all beliefs to pursue them.

But those optimistic explorations also lead to some less-than-believable moments in the story, which always seems designed to afford Zina a wealth of opportunities. Her fortunes are incredible: she finds work and shelter immediately, even as a pregnant, teenage runaway, and is able to complete school with ease. A friendly young man with an art-laden apartment shows up offering her a room, rent free, when she needs it; later she inherits millions from a woman whom she knew only briefly. Even her grand struggles dissipate quickly, including her resistance to the love of a kind man.

The lack of suspense is consistent, and sometimes at odds with the story itself, which takes many dramatic turns, including a brutal assault and a kidnapping. There is never much doubt that Zina and her family will prevail and that forgiveness is always at hand. Where the story concentrates on Zina as a vulnerable and growing young girl, it is a successfully sweet foray into women's religious lives; where it strives for more incredible turns, it strains credulity, sometimes beyond reason.

Years pass quickly, and kind characters move in and out of the story with ease and gentle presence. Prose is both swift and self-consciously affecting. Characters are somewhat formulaic, particularly black and gay characters, who are subject to light, if nonhostile, caricaturing. The text works to celebrate differences, if it does not always do so with much depth.

Speeches around personal progress are preachy, but they also result in small, happy redemptions. Zina herself grows into a woman of presence, and other characters develop in a similar style, always emerging from their challenges as more well-rounded, and eternally hopeful, people. The result is a cast that is lovable and admirable, if not always believable. Happily-ever-afters are never much in doubt, but those who come to the tale for its spiritually cheerful core

are likely to still find much about the conclusions in *Gabriel's Daughters* to celebrate.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (August 26, 2016)

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