

★ **Godshot**

Chelsea Bieker

Catapult (Apr 7, 2020)

Hardcover \$26.00 (336pp)

978-1-948226-48-6

The faithful girls of a struggling California town are asked to sacrifice an ungodly amount in Chelsea Bieker's *Godshot*, a blazing novel about the messes made when blind faith metastasizes into madness.

In the heat of a deep Central Valley drought, fiery Pastor Vern, who's anointed in gold dust and who heralds himself as better than the second coming, baptizes his flock in Coca-Cola, sends his women on secret assignments, and promises that the rains are coming.

Fourteen-year-old Lacey and her mother find a home in this milieu, their lives for once free from men and booze. Lacey is a true believer, but her mother warns her off from growing up too soon. Heedless, Lacey tells Vern everything: that her mother has broken the rules; that she is a woman, and ready for an assignment.

Lacey's mother is expelled, and Vern orders that Lacey be assaulted. Lacey compartmentalizes, rationalizes, and survives, but then learns that the baby she's carrying will be considered church property upon its birth. She picks at the fraying edges of the church's specialized gospel and concocts a lie to shield herself from its continued influence. With her wiles and the help of three women at the fringes, she finally has a chance to be truly reborn.

Bieker's portraits of people are harrowing, demolishing the affectations of followers and survivors alike. Her cast includes doulas and pimps, addicts and liars, and children who mimic adults in their struggle to subsist; the novel's grace is that it makes second chances available to all among them who are brave enough to extend empathy to others.

Godshot is a flinty, exemplary novel that celebrates everyday rebellions, demolishing blind religious fervor and unmasking charlatans as it goes.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2020)

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