

Heaven

Emerson Whitney

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Emerson Whitney's genre-bending memoir *Heaven* is about gender, family, and memory. It is cerebral in examining social labels and expectations, as well as how selves are constructed and the stories that people tell themselves about their lives.

Mimicking memory, the book's structure is nonlinear. Whitney describes their childhood; these accounts are interspersed with their current musings on disability and the body, as well as with literary critiques and academic treatises. The book meanders like a conversation. As it progresses, Whitney's story assumes a clearer shape and direction.

The book's construction is sometimes disconcerting, but this is Whitney's point: life is not always neat and tidy. They declare "I can't explain myself without making a mess." Within this "mess" lies the story that Whitney is trying to tell; it's one that accepts that memory fails, and relationships are sometimes contradictory. At its heart, *Heaven* is about learning to live in one's body while coming to terms with one's sexuality and identity.

Whitney is at their best when describing relationships. Their relationship with their grandmother is tangible; their mother is rendered in such a way that she remains sympathetic, despite her actions. Memoir sections are interspersed with cultural commentary and research; the parts of the book that venture away from Whitney's story are interesting, but disjointed.

Visceral and descriptive, the text spares no detail. The rawness of Whitney's emotions comes through. This is a book about survival, and the writing reflects that; there is much to digest and process throughout.

Heaven is an unflinching personal examination of family and identity, bearing witness to what it means to live life on one's own terms.

JAIME HERNDON (March / April 2020)

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