

Leaving Milan

Elizabeth Oness

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Credible teen protagonist Harper struggles with family issues, small-town values, and the problems of growing up.

Themes of growing up and small-town communities are explored in this heartwarming and uplifting portrait of an older teen striving for more than what the small town of Milan, Ohio, can offer.

Seventeen-year-old Harper lives with her mother, whom she hates. Her brother, David, has already escaped Milan to attend college elsewhere. Harper plans to follow suit. She gets a job at Dunkin' Donuts, where she meets and hits it off with Nate, who is in town temporarily. The series of events that follow threaten to keep Harper in Milan, but she is determined to make a better life for herself.

Elizabeth Oness has a talent for characterization. Harper is a credible teen protagonist whose struggles with her mother are effectively portrayed through Harper constantly cleaning their apartment and Harper's sophistication over her mother, as revealed when her mother takes her to a bar to compete in a talent show—while her mother considers this doing something “fun,” Harper tells her that “it’s cheesy and stupid.” Ultimately, what makes Harper a sympathetic and engaging character is that many of her problems are compounded by the naïveté of youth but are also overcome by her determination to leave town and find a life for herself.

Through Nate, who talks about sunnigashi and his plan to return to Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, Oness conveys themes of creativity and freedom (theme of “life” is ambiguous. Please verify all my changes to this sentence ok with reviewer.TM), both of which Harper seeks for her own life.

Leaving Milan is a light, fast-flowing story. Its clean and uncluttered narrative captures the atmosphere of a small town with its facade of quiet life that blankets the discontent that bubbles in high-school kids, like Harper, who can't fit in: “She felt as if she'd been dropped in the wrong place and, just as a soldier dropped behind enemy lines could not stay where he landed, she had no intention of staying in Milan.”

Leaving Milan is a beguilingly simple and uplifting story about a young girl finding her life.

MAYA FLEISCHMANN (Spring 2015)

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