

Light Beneath Ferns

Anne Spollen

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Diaphanous and deceptive, *Light Beneath Ferns* is a subtle ghost story narrated by Elizah Rayne, a critical and thoughtful fourteen-year-old girl who prefers her own dark and insightful thoughts to the prattle of her classmates. At the core of this book are relationships and mystery. Elizah's father disappears in a fog of gambling debt-induced shame only to reappear through a window in the dead of night. Elizah's mother and her guidance counselor join forces in an effort to better understand her, but end up in deeper darkness. Nathaniel, a boy who understands Elizah better than anyone, sometimes seems like a dream: he has puzzlingly cold skin and doesn't leave any footprints in the snow.

Elizah and her mother move to a small house on the edge of a cemetery in an effort to escape the shame of her father's past gambling debts. Although her new classmates find Elizah's proximity to the cemetery eerie, she likes the quiet and the sense that the cemetery holds a secret. When she finds a human jawbone half-buried in the riverbank one autumn day, that secret is revealed bit by bit, artifact by artifact.

While Elizah's mother and Mrs. Daytner plan her social calendar, assign her friends and a boyfriend, and worry about her seeming isolation, Elizah begins to lead a double life centered around Nathaniel. He is a compellingly quiet boy who spends his days walking around the cemetery and floating on the river in an elegant, old-fashioned boat. When she can't spend time with Nathaniel, she begins to get involved with her mother's new friends, who explore the secrets of the supernatural during their parties. Slowly at first, and then in a torrent, information about the cemetery and the town's past begins to appear and weave together. Elizah must put together all of these fragments, keep her pesky classmates and fake boyfriend at bay, and decipher how she feels about her father's disappearance, her mother's new boyfriend, and her own infatuation with a boy that is literally half-there.

Spollen keeps readers in a fog for the majority of this novel, pulling them along with tidbits and clues, but the story is really driven by Elizah's unique and piquant personality. The prose is slippery and creates a spectacularly suspenseful atmosphere that would easily buoy the reader through to the riddle's end, but Elizah's strange observations and wise but tongue-in-cheek musings are what will make young adult readers relate to this novel. There is a lot to be learned from Elizah's story about love, death, time, relationships, and how they all blend together in a silvery whirl of mystery.

ELISE NAGY (January / February 2010)

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