

## Light from Distant Stars

**Shawn Smucker**

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A compelling tale of family and faith with a paranormal twist, Shawn Smucker's *Light from Distant Stars* probes at questions of good, evil, and whether anyone—or anything—is ever just one or the other.

After Cohen finds his father comatose on the floor of the family's funeral home, his fractured family reconnects at their waning patriarch's bedside and old resentments rise to the surface. Cohen sweeps through the darkest recesses of his mind, discovering secrets that he hoped would never claw back into the light. The tense environment is compounded by the reappearance of his childhood friend, Ava, now a detective investigating Cohen's involvement in his father's imminent end.

Interspersed throughout the novel are flashbacks to Cohen's childhood, illuminating fresh aspects of the players now gathered under the sterile fluorescent of the hospital room. Cohen recalls his father, Calvin, as a pulpit-pounding preacher before the explosive reveal of a scandalous secret drove Cohen's mother to the city with his younger sister, Kaye. Cohen moved to the funeral home with his father, reaching adolescence with little but corpses for company. There, he witnessed something he could not explain that drew him deep into a sinister, supernatural mystery.

While Cohen is the focus of the novel, his perspective is sometimes hollow, and it's hard to grasp his true nature. His most illuminating moments come through his interactions with a sparkling constellation of secondary characters, including Father James, an aged priest and longtime friend; Kaye; and Thatcher, a teenager whose grandfather is in an adjacent hospital room.

Twin twists late in the novel provide resolution to the childhood and present-day timelines, but they're rushed. Some of the paranormal elements are more sudden than surprising.

A tense novel exploring the breadth and limitations of loyalty, forgiveness, and faith, *Light from Distant Stars* is a memorable dive into the human psyche.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (July/August 2019)

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