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Shaken in the Water

Jessica Penner
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Fate and faith, curse and coincidence—through vividly imagined characters, Jessica Penner creates a complex journey through dark places that follow generations.

In 1903, a baby girl, Agnes, is born into an ultra-conservative Mennonite community. The strange birthmark she bears the midwife calls a "Tiger Scar," a mark which, she says, portends either greatness or disaster. Jessica Penner's winding novel follows Agnes' life and the generations that follow to discover which it will be. And when Agnes' family members start to hear a mysterious "voice," the question becomes whether their guide means them good or something else entirely.

Penner's novel delves deep into matters of faith, forbidden love, and well-intended yet often deeply dysfunctional family systems. It looks at how religion can both define and stifle. And it considers the struggle one may face when balancing the expectations of one's faith and community with being true to oneself. Yet it takes an entirely unexpected twist, as a touch of the mysterious and supernatural drives much of the story.

Though she ultimately forms a full-length novel, Penner uses a series of snapshots that flash through time and from one character to another. She follows each person as they experience love, heartbreak, shattered dreams, faith lost, and hope restored. Agnes' husband determines to live a righteous life though haunted by forbidden desires. Her daughter, Huldah, is caught in a tornado, and though the young woman lives, the event alters her life—and everyone else's. But most significant is Agnes' mysterious friend, who captures her soul, and that of others, in ways that defy explanation. Sons, daughters, and grandchildren all live lives marked with pain, and all experience supernatural, mysterious things, as though guided by an unseen force. Though they don't know who or what the "voice" they hear is, they will follow wherever it leads, even if to dark places.

Penner's novel is deeply compelling. She writes with a kind of power that seems hard to resist. She creates vivid characters and engaging suspense. And she writes about a fascinating community of people.

However, the book is not for the faint-of-heart. Nor for anyone seeking a light read. Jumping from time period to time period and character to character—often within the chapters—makes the book difficult to follow. Additionally, the author's choice not to use quotation marks around dialogue only adds to the work the reader must do to get through her book.

The story may not be for the most conservative audience, either. Penner's religious themes do not translate to holy or even upbeat ones. There are references to incest and abuse. And nearly all marriages are filled with pain. Nevertheless, one wants to muddle through and find the gem that clearly glimmers under the surface.
DIANE GARDNER (Fall 2013)

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