

The Biographies of Ordinary People: Volume 2: 2004–2016

Nicole Dieker

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The Biographies of Ordinary People: Volume 2 is a satisfying family saga about growing up and coming into one's own.

Nicole Dieker's *The Biographies of Ordinary People, Vol. 2: 2004–2016* brings back the Gruber girls as they grow into women, enduring the everyday elation and indignity that the process brings.

It is easy to empathize with the three Gruber sisters as they face the familiar doubts and dilemmas of early adulthood. The first volume began on the girls' mother's thirty-fifth birthday, with a move from Oregon to the Midwest; at that time, Meredith, the eldest daughter and the series' central character, was seven. This second volume ends with Meredith's thirty-fifth birthday, which finds her back in the Pacific Northwest, but with an otherwise very different life than her mom led at the same age.

The book employs an episodic structure to give glimpses into various characters' lives, which are free from earth-shattering events. Scenes cover the ordinary: Meredith takes temp jobs after a theater internship falls through; her younger sisters Natalie and Jackie make their way through college; her parents reframe their lives as empty-nesters whose kids all live states away from them. The elder Grubers are less the focus here.

Still, as the Gruber girls age, it becomes clear that their lives are not necessarily as ordinary as they might seem. They all complete college; Meredith goes on to graduate school, although the experience is disappointing. Two of the three sisters are able to earn money in creative fields, though neither is able to support herself entirely with her art. All are able to enter into romantic relationships with people they love—or not. Such fortunate circumstances are less universal than those detailed in the first volume; this series addition may have narrower appeal as a result.

Still, the narrative is insightful, particularly when it details the emotions and experiences of the well-rounded girls. Finely drawn scenes may come sans drama, but they don't require that to hold interest. They are more lovely snapshots than anything else—as when Natalie and her boyfriend Calvin visit the National Zoo and watch a turtle as it labors to climb a rock. Their hope for the reptile comes to parallel their hopes for their own burgeoning love. The same sentimentality carries over to the rest of the novel, throughout which the Gruber girls hope that happiness will somehow subtly lift their lives from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

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CHARLENE OLDHAM (April 11, 2018)

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