

The Burden of Light

Ellia Vierling

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Internal and external struggles meld seamlessly to create an introspective, thoughtful debut.

In her first novel, *The Burden of Light*, Ellia Vierling offers a thoughtful study of a loner struggling to overcome his past.

As a young boy, Raymond gleams from his depressive mother and clueless father a profound sense of worthlessness. He leaves home, vowing never to return and leaving behind his sad beginning. Moving haplessly from one menial job to another, he has difficulty relating to other people and reacts in frustrated anger to each new failure he encounters. An opportunity to break this pattern occurs when he meets Clarissa and Earl, who offer him friendship and free room and board in their home. During this period, Raymond meets “his Jenny,” a fine young woman who surprises him by returning his affections.

The story takes place in rural locations in an unspecified time frame. Commencing with an epilogue, the story begins with Raymond, later in his life, employed servicing septic systems and living in a run-down apartment overlooking a river. Thus isolated, he ruminates about the events of his past, memories that trigger flashbacks to his childhood; the time with Clarissa, Earl, and Jenny; and his subsequent downward spiral. The plot then returns to and concludes at Raymond’s dwelling by the river, where he faces yet another daunting setback. Vierling uses this complex structure to good effect, skillfully maintaining the story’s continuity throughout.

An introspective work, written in a third-person limited perspective, the book focuses primarily on Raymond’s thoughts. However, Vierling also movingly depicts Jenny’s emotional sensitivity, as when a nurse offers to let her hold her gravely ill premature baby, Abigail, for the first time. Jenny’s heart pounds as she waits for the baby to be placed in her arms. “Suddenly, she felt afraid; she had dreamt of this moment since she first found out that she would have a child.”

Raymond’s signature quirk of punching the air, which he does to express his frustrations and, less often, happiness, poignantly symbolizes his inadequate self-esteem. But no matter how many times he punches the air, works long hours to support Jenny and the baby, or picks futile fights to prove his manhood, he cannot shake his belief that “he was nothing more than the coward his father had always been.”

Vierling melds Raymond’s internal monologue seamlessly with the external events of his life. Unable to control his reactive temper, Raymond’s behavior is not always admirable, but the agony he suffers because of it elicits empathy as he tries repeatedly to conquer his dark side. The equally well-drawn supporting characters add a balance of normalcy to this story. The plot points move forward smoothly and connect logically, except for a few instances that stretch credibility, such as Raymond’s chance encounter with a stranger in a bar who just happens to show him a picture of his daughter.

Although some readers may lack patience for its long descriptive passages, this well-told story of a man's search for redemption deserves wide readership.

MARGARET CULLISON (March 22, 2014)

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