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The Cellar Door

Brett Gadbois
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Divorce, through the eyes of a child, is ugly, terrifying, and traumatic. The stable shifts. The permanent dissolves. Nothing is ever as real as it once seemed to be. And no matter how many reassurances of love both parents may give, the child must discover, for him- or herself, how to process what has happened to the world once so understandable.

For nine-year-old Sam Bixby, the lost hero of Brett Gadbois's beautifully imagined novel, *The Cellar Door*, the full reality of his parents divorce hits when his mother wants to move him to California for unexplained reasons. He feels something within, unable to name or reach it. "Sam remembered walking around his mom's house feeling itchy, prickly, like his skin was hot and uncomfortable and somehow he didn't belong in it." But it's not until he strays into an abandoned house while visiting his dad and tumbles through the cellar door that he is able to confront the full turmoil he feels.

Building on the reality-and-fantasy-blending tradition of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Gadbois creates a world as metaphorically unreal as Sam sees his own life at times. Humans and animals are not fully what they appear to be, quite often stuck in hybrid forms. Blueberries talk, taking pride in their color. And the crystal clear water tastes so sweet, it fills Sam with laughter during even his darkest moments.

Newly found friends teach the boy shape-shifting abilities he never suspected he possessed. From birds and bees to storm clouds, Sam experiences not just his own life but a world of possibilities as he wanders through the world trying to find a way back to his father.

But danger follows. Two hybrid crow-men hunt Sam, hoping to learn the secret of his power. Sam must learn to tell friend from foe and to trust his own inner strength to make it back home.

With remarkable sensitivity, Gadbois's story portrays a beautiful father-son relationship without ever vilifying the mother. Young readers as young as eight or nine will find solace and hope while reading this story with either parent. And younger children will benefit by having it read to them.

No book can ever make sense of something as alien to a child as one's parents splitting up, but *The Cellar Door* provides at minimum a moment of escape, and at its best a chance for parents and children to connect as they follow Sam's adventures.

JOSEPH THOMPSON (October 12, 2011)

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