ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

The Girl Who Fell from the Sky
Heidi W. Durrow
Algonquin
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In this haunting debut, based on a true event, a mother and her three young children fall from the rooftop of their Chicago apartment building in 1982. Narrator Rachel Morse, the sole survivor, possesses author Heidi Durrow's own physical traits and family background. The middle daughter of a black G.I. and a Danish immigrant, "light-skinned-ed" Rachel sports both nappy hair and blue eyes.

When her absent father fails to return and care for her, Rachel is uprooted to live with her grandmother, the first black woman to buy a house in her part of Portland. The biracial girl spends her childhood and adolescence caught between two cultures. Admonished by her classmates for acting white and collected as a prize by the socialite who's "never done it with a black girl before," Rachel constantly questions her identity, beauty, and sexuality, and how they are all intertwined with her race and the standards society has created.

The biggest question that drives this stunning novel, however, is the mystery surrounding the family's fall. While Rachel's grandmother blames Nella, the girl's mother, and warns the girl not to follow in her footsteps, others suggest possible foul play from an odd man on the roof or an alcoholic boyfriend. And while her grandmother tries to hide the past, Rachel struggles to claim the truth about the tragedy, her role in it, and herself.

She narrates her story in the first person, with interspersed, detached memories in the third person giving the effect of a reporter's account. Winner of the 2008 Bellwether Prize for Fiction, a literary prize that advocates social justice, Durrow also interjects the remembrances of those touched by the heartbreaking incident: Rachel's father, Nella's boss, and Brick, a former birdwatcher who saw the family plummet and is forced to reinvent himself because of it, as well as entries from Nella's diary.

Together, their varying perspectives form a complete, unforgettable narrative. With an intriguing storyline, a historical look at black perceptions in the 1980s, and spot-on dialogue, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* soars.

Angela Leeper