

The Glow Stone

Ellen Dreyer

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Fifteen-year-old Phoebe Bernstein is confused. Everyone is saying that her favorite uncle, Bradford, died of a “heart attack brought on by his pneumonia-weakened lungs.” But that doesn’t make sense to Phoebe. Bradford “was strong and agile.” He dreamed of becoming a botanist, of studying plants in the Amazon. He taught Phoebe everything she knows about the study of rocks, and he even gave her a large desk to store her rocks in. Now, however, Mom wants to sell the desk, to get rid of everything that reminds her of her brother.

Phoebe has always known that her mother is fragile and suffers from chronic depression; now she wonders whether Brad was severely depressed too, and whether depression is genetically passed on to generations within a family. Phoebe takes her mother’s diary, and learns more than she ever wanted to know. When her mom was a teenager she became depressed after a cousin, who seemed fine at Hanukkah, committed suicide on Christmas Day. A few days later, Mom made her first suicide attempt. Phoebe becomes concerned, and tries to be more considerate of her mother’s feelings.

An experienced underground caver, the author attended the University of Michigan, where she will be a writer-in-residence in the fall of 2006. She has worked as an editorial assistant at E.P. Dutton and has offered writing workshops in New York City schools. She has written novels, chapter books, and picture books, but this is her first book for young adults.

After the unveiling of Brad’s tombstone, Phoebe goes to stay at her grandparents’ home with Aunt Erica, and this seems to be just the thing to get the girl’s mind off her uncle and mother. Without telling anyone, Phoebe and her aunt go exploring underground, and though it is scary, the adventure is thrilling. Aunt Erica goes in one more time, leaving Phoebe above ground until she believes she hears Erica calling out to her. Worried, Phoebe goes in alone and within minutes she is cold, lost, and possibly hallucinating. Her uncle Brad comes to her, tells her the truth about his death, and points her toward safety, toward the sun-filled glow stone. Phoebe returns home, safe and more knowledgeable. “The world above ground is just as tricky to navigate as the world below,” she reasons, while trying to make sense of the lies surrounding Brad’s death.

Intended for ages twelve through sixteen, this book offers certain chapters set underground, which would make strong read-alouds that could connect with school science curriculum. The novel asks difficult questions about grief, depression, and adulthood, rendering a melancholy tone. Divided into five “stratums,” the book pulls the reader in from the first line—“I died once”—and then slowly releases its grip as the pace ebbs, flows, and then soars again, offering mystery and adventure.

KAAVONIA HINTON (June 8, 2006)

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