FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Spiritual

The Searchers
Naomi Gladish Smith
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The concept of purgatory, an intermediary realm between the Biblical ideal of Heaven and the torment of Hell, is not exclusively a Catholic belief. In *The Searchers*, teachings of eighteenth-century theologian Emanuel Swedenborg are incorporated into this esoteric, but enlightening, work of fiction. Swedenborg, a self-proclaimed visionary, claimed to have seen the spirit world and left behind his descriptions to inspire writers such as Naomi Gladish Smith. She considers herself a sojourner along with the protagonists in her novel.

Though several characters play a prominent role, the initial focus is on Dan, a young man who commits suicide. A peaceful void is not what awaits him after death; instead, he confronts a strange world that will not let him rest, but this scenario is far from the traditional notion of Hell. For everyone in this school for uninitiated souls, it's a learning experience that forces realizations, truths, and doubts to the surface. These interwoven, individual stories take place in the afterlife. Surreal elements plunge this tale into a dreamscape, yet the students at this unique spiritual academy interact with one another much as they would have in a physical milieu. Their conversations are realistic and natural; relationships become the foundation for discovery and renewal. The book hovers on the brink of pleasure and pain.

In one scene Smith describes a tranquil setting filled with angelic harmony: "A melody drifted through the open windows with the sun's early morning rays. Both music and light were faint at first, then, as the soaring sound of women's voices grew louder, the light that filled the room brightened to a diamond brilliance."

Yet in the following excerpt, a conventional manifestation of Hell emerges: “The creature tilted its head and sniffed the breeze. It stretched its long neck to peek above the twigs and branches and was rewarded by the sight of a woman striding up the road, clenched fists swinging at her side. The creature waited until she was just past its clump of brush to step into the road.”

This dramatic contrast appears throughout Smith’s writing as she alternates between refined symbolism and subtle allegory. Nothing is taken literally or for granted in this exploration of what happens after the soul leaves the body. Before anyone can settle into a new environment, lessons not learned in life will be reinforced.

Naomi Gladish Smith is the author of *The Arrivals* and *The Wanderers*, novels that also delve into the next world. Her essays and articles have been published in anthologies and periodicals. The work of this evocative author may soothe those fearful of death or frighten those who never gave their own demise much thought, but she never fails to intrigue and entertain. *The Searchers*

is ideal for the open-minded reader fascinated with metaphysics.

Julia Ann Charpentier