

The Secret Thief

Judith Jaeger

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When the first door slams in Connie Grey's face, the reader begins a journey with her through many long-closed doors, drawers, and closets. Connie's guide through her family's history is no kindly apron-wearing, cookie-making grandmother. As the story unfolds over one long and grueling summer, both grandmother's and mother's secret histories are uncovered.

Immediately following her college graduation, Connie, the "Secret Thief" of the title, arrives back in small-town New Hampshire to help her grandmother pack up her house in preparation for a move to a retirement home. It's a house full of family memories, many of them seemingly unhappy ones. Along with meaningless stolen trinkets and a collection of five-finger-discount expensive running shoes, Connie brings with her a mysterious and debilitating stomach condition she's suffered with since childhood—a condition that her summer's work at her grandmother's only exacerbates.

The author holds an MFA in creative writing from Goddard College and teaches undergraduate fiction and creative writing. Her careful psychological research shows throughout this first novel, and is shared with the reader as a compelling engine for the story and without a heavy hand.

In addition to packing her grandmother's possessions, Connie collects "free for me" trinkets from local retail establishments, items for which she always provides the reader with the retail price: "I rifle through my clothes. There are three pairs of jeans—\$60.00 each, but free for me. Four pairs of gym shorts—\$26.95 each at my college bookstore, but free for me. A pile of T-shirts from the Gap, Old Navy and Banana Republic—they average about \$25 a piece. Free for me." Her grandmother, on the other hand, "collects her grudges, polishes them and puts them on display."

If the story begins a bit awkwardly in the first few pages, it quickly gains momentum as Connie collects her secrets. Gradually the reader is guided through the family history, as Connie opens and examines it in her grandmother's overstuffed attic. Carefully embroidered clothing, locked trunks, and secret boxes reveal the unexpected and previously completely silent tale. In addition to the items Connie secrets from stores, she begins to collect her own story through items from her grandmother's house, carefully hiding each in discrete caches. Readers will grow to care about this agile Secret Thief as she tries to solve the puzzle of her own place in her family history.

CHRIS ARVIDSON (August 7, 2006)

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