

## Unravel

**Sharon Jennings**

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In Sharon Jennings's brisk, emotional novel *Unravel*, a young heroine finds the courage to separate herself from her father's lies and uncover the truth.

Though she is almost twelve, Rebecca has never attended school. She lives with her father, Joe, who is controlling, suspicious, insistent that the rest of their family died, and secretive, such that Rebecca knows little else, not even her father's birthday. He moves Rebecca whenever neighbors question their homeschooling methods, which entail Rebecca reading by herself. Now, Rebecca is reluctant to move again. When she expresses doubts about Joe's stories about their past, she finds a gradual escape, buoyed by friends and the knowledge that "the heroine never gives up" in the books that she likes.

Despite its dark, peripheral backstory, which involves the events that led Rebecca to her isolated life, the book's spotlight stays on Rebecca's present. Thanks to her love for her community, including a warm Italian surrogate family, and the kindness of Toronto strangers who surprise her, she thrives, even when her circumstances are tough. A glamorous adult recluse who employs Rebecca is a less realistic throwback to a bygone film era, though their connection inspires Rebecca's trust. Quirky characters and Rebecca's precocious, solitary wanderings across the city recall some of her literary favorites, including *Harriet the Spy*, further revealing how much reading has saved her.

Rebecca's growth from naiveté to self-awareness about her nomadic life is handled with sensitivity and depth; her defiance of Joe's rules as she tests out a more assertive identity results in tense, inspiring moments. Throughout, the novel wrestles with the mature topic of what it's like to leave an abuser, ending with a heartrending chance for Rebecca to find her roots.

**KAREN RIGBY** (March / April 2021)

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