

Valley of Saint Anne

Dave Gioia

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Dave Gioia manages to handle taboo topics with an easygoing style in this unconventional tale of a girl's coming of age.

Family secrets sit at the center of this unconventional coming-of-age story. Dave Gioia's substantial debut novel, *Valley of Saint Anne*, tells an unsettling story in an easygoing style that belies the gravity of the themes he addresses. Through the largely innocent voice of twelve-year-old Deirdre "Dee Dee" Beyer, Gioia unflinchingly examines topics often considered taboo for adult discussion, such as domestic violence, alcoholism, and incest.

Dee Dee keeps a diary, writing to "Anneliese," her imagined version of Anne Frank, much as Anne wrote her diaries to the imaginary "Kitty." Like Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Dee Dee's diary presents an optimistic outlook on devastating events, although the juxtaposition of the Holocaust with the breakup of a modern family may raise some eyebrows, considering the difference in scale between the two. Dee Dee's parents are divorced—her father is now married to a dramatic, drunken diva, and her mother is dating a younger man with a mysterious background.

Revelations and challenges to the status quo come at a fast and furious pace throughout Dee Dee's diary, and the interwoven scenes with her extended family carry a soap-opera sensationalism. There's a same-sex couple having each other's babies; there are mistaken identities, tragic deaths, and complicated love triangles; and there is plenty of sex. Melodrama abounds, as is evident from the book's cover: a seaside sunset with a young girl's face appearing in the clouds. Gioia's sex scenes are explicit, sometimes erotic, and often uncomfortable to read. Some older male characters enjoy interludes with very young female characters, for instance, and biologically related partners nonetheless find each other sexually irresistible.

The sexual elements should be shocking, and if this were a soap opera, these forbidden moments would be revealed as dramatic surprises. Much of Gioia's story is foreshadowed, however, in the diary entries from the future that open the book. Writing from 2050, a grown Dee Dee remembers her life in outline before we flash back to the actual events. Too much is revealed up front, so that when taboos are broken later in the story, the reader has long suspected the outcome, and this diminishes the immediacy of the events.

Similarly, a secondary story line involving illegal immigration, drug smuggling, and mobsters insinuates itself on Dee Dee's story, distracting readers from her trials. These thriller-like sketches, although intriguing, seem to belong to another book altogether.

For a long novel, however, *Valley of Saint Anne* reads pretty quickly. Gioia frequently switches from diary pages to casual conversations to dramatic events and back again, which keeps things fresh. Sometimes the rhythmic return to the diary results in repetition of information we may have already gleaned from other scenes, but mostly it serves to reestablish the innocent voice of Dee Dee as she tries to make sense of the world's complicated rules about relationships.

Valley of Saint Anne is not for everyone. Readers wishing to avoid explicit sex scenes may not want to follow Gioia down this convention-challenging path. Others, however, will appreciate the way Gioia manages to show a difference between sexually abusive relationships and healthy relationships that nonetheless necessitate breaking some of society's rules.

SHEILA M. TRASK (December 12, 2013)

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