



The Grave of God's Daughter

By Brett Ellen Block
ISBN: 9780060525071

Introduction

At the funeral of her estranged mother, a woman is faced with the past she's tried to put behind her only to find that what transpired in her childhood has never been further away than her own shadow. Now the choice to close the thirty year rift between mother and daughter has been laid before her. The year is 1941. Rooted in the lonely outreaches of the Allegheny Mountains is the town of Hyde Bend. Its heart is a steel mill, its bones the tight community of Polish immigrants who inhabit it, and its blood their fierce Catholic faith. But buried in the town's soul is a dangerous secret surrounding the death of a revered Priest.

When a young girl from the town's poorest quarter accidentally unearths a sliver of the truth surrounding the illicit secret, a woman is found dead and Hyde Bend erupts in fear and finger-pointing. Compelled to unravel the intertwining mysteries, the young girl discovers her own family at the center.

To save her family and herself, she must confront everything she thought she knew, including her feelings about all she holds sacred.

Vivid, evocative, and psychologically penetrating, Brett Ellen Block captures the hidden inner life of a town battling to survive in a rapidly changing world, and paints an extraordinary portrait of a young girl's desperate longing for grace.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Brett Ellen Block chose for her narrator to remain nameless? How did not knowing her name impact your impression of this character? Do you wish that you had known her name?
2. Though the community cemetery was compromised by an underwater stream -- and had become a place where "all of the delicately carved headstones list and pitch as if riding a heady sea" -- why would the girl's mother choose to be buried there? Who do you think will take the plot next to her mother's grave?
3. How does the protagonist feel about Martin's fate? Do you think that she bears any responsibility for his descent into the cycle of alcoholism and poverty? What do you think ultimately caused her brother to "never be the same?" How do you think Martin would have felt about the relationship of his mother and father if he learned the truth about his sister's parentage?
4. Do you feel that it was the discovery of her mother's secret that saved the girl from a life in Hyde Bend? What do you think ultimately gave her the strength and determination to escape the small town's brutal legacy and establish her own foothold in the world?
5. How did the fierce Catholic faith of the different characters in this novel drive and sustain them? How did it betray them? Discuss how fear -- of both what is real, and what is imagined -- serves as a driving force in this novel.
6. Discuss the father figures in the life of the young girl. What kind of surrogate parenting did she receive from Mr. Goceljak and Mr. Beresik? What did they offer her that the women in her life, her mother and the nuns at her school could not?
7. Discuss the significance of the Black Madonna. Why do you think that her mother "prayed to it daily, locking eyes with the Madonna and whispering to her, pleading almost conspiratorially?" What do you think she prayed for? What might she have lost from her life when she was forced to sell it to save her daughter's name?
8. After the girl and Martin reclaim the portrait of the Black Madonna, why do you think it was so important to the girl and Martin to touch its surface? What longing in the children was satisfied? In what way were they able to establish new boundaries in their relationship with their mother?
9. In Hyde Bend, a community that experienced such terrible poverty, how did you feel about the indulgences of the priest? Do you believe that his example served a role in ultimately destroying the young girl's faith? Why do you think the girl's mother chose to work at Saint Ladislaus for her entire life?
10. How does the girl punish herself for the actions of her parents? How does she comfort herself? Do you believe that her mother's relationship with the revered priest was a "romantic tale" as the girl hopes or do you think the story of her conception was more complicated?
11. Discuss the character of Swatka Pani. Do you think that it was the drowning of her son that caused her to wreak vengeance on Hyde Bend, or do you think that her vicious nature was innate? Who do you think her actions tortured the most and why? Do you think that her death was justified? Do you think she brought it on herself?
12. At the end of the novel, the girl has "a family now, a husband, children, another life, a life that is waiting for me somewhere else." She fears an argument with her brother about "how I have abandoned my old life, this town, and him." Do you think that the girl had to completely divorce herself from the past in order to claim her present? Do you think the narrator has found happiness? Do you think that coming to understand how deeply her mother loved her was what ultimately might have saved her?

About the Author

Brett Ellen Block is originally from New Jersey, and is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her debut collection of stories, **Destination Known**, won the Drue Heinz Literary Prize, and she also is the past recipient of the Hopwood Prize, the Haugh Prize, a NEA screenwriting grant, and the Michener-Copernicus Fellowship. She lives in Los Angeles.