

The Sky above the Roof

Nathacha Appanah

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In Nathacha Appanah's luminous novel *The Sky above the Roof*, a teenager's impulsive, confused actions lead to his imprisonment.

Formidable, intense Phoenix was forced to be a child entertainer. Doll-like, she sang for adoring audiences with her hair curled and her small face rouged and lipsticked. Following a traumatic incident, Phoenix rebelled, exhibiting increasing violence. She left home soon after, covering her body with tattoos, starting an auto parts business, and raising two children as a single mother.

Wolf is Phoenix's seventeen-year-old son; he was so named to reflect Phoenix's hopes that he'd be fierce and brave. Instead, he acts more like an anxious chameleon: he still looks like a child; he endures panic attacks and observes the world with "big, sad eyes." Wolf and his older sister, Paloma, share a unique, close relationship, until troubles with their mother prompt Paloma to find her own apartment.

After his sister moves away, Wolf is frantic and alone. He steals his mother's car to visit Paloma and is arrested for reckless endangerment and driving without a license. In the detention center, a numbing "survival instinct" tells Wolf to "forget his heart" and accept the confines of his cell. He is given a toothbrush and other essential items, along with a booklet, *I Am in Prison*. Forming a reluctant alliance, Paloma and Phoenix struggle to save Wolf from the void of the juvenile justice system.

Taut and impressionistic, the novel offers a quiet advisory regarding the treatment of youthful offenders. While Wolf's crime isn't violent or premeditated, he is sent to jail; there, his mental and physical vulnerabilities seem even more unnerving and his future becomes precarious.

The Sky above the Roof is a haunting story about family disconnect and dysfunction; its intriguing heroes walk a gradual path toward healing, empathy, and emergence.

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