

Well Below Heaven

Idyllwild Eliot

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This gritty young adult novel relates stories of adolescent challenges with authenticity.

Idyllwild Eliot's *Well Below Heaven* is a dark novel of sibling loyalty in a modern American family. Separated after one is sent to a remote disciplinary program, a brother and sister struggle to take care of each other, telling stories and offering advice through letters and emails. Eliot's young adult novel is rich with the joys and miseries of teenage life.

After she is caught with just a few ounces of marijuana, Kelly's parents decide to ship her off to a spartan boarding school in the wilderness where the rough living is almost as difficult as being separated from Sammy, her younger brother, who is about to enter his own wilderness: high school. Now unable to shelter him from their volatile parents or the seedy clique that she used to hang with, Kelly is only able to send him advice: eat your lima beans; focus on football; wait till you're ready for sex; never get caught with drugs. She does so through inconsistent letters and emails. As the semester drags on, it becomes clear that her little brother isn't the innocent he used to be, and their relationship takes on a new maturity. They swap stories and advice on teenage pyromaniacs and knife fights.

Eliot's depiction of modern adolescence is heightened for drama but reads with a heartfelt authenticity. Her characters move with ease from everyday frustrations with overbearing parents to soul-searching questions of identity and morality, the sort of strange juxtaposition that becomes normal during the turbulent years of high school.

The specifics of Kelly's and Sammy's lives aren't pretty; they are, in fact, often deeply uncomfortable. With the casualness of kids who are struggling to discover who they are, the siblings' anecdotes are full of cruel comments, slurs, harsh judgements, and earnest attempts at jaded attitudes. Kelly's anecdotes about the "pervy" warden at her program and Sammy's descriptions of his experiences at "the caves" where older kids take naked photos of each other are heartbreaking as the teens waver between innocence and bravado.

Eliot avoids the pitfalls of epistolary novels that are too concerned with their forms, managing to walk the line of acknowledging her story's structure without distracting from the nuances of the tale. Within their letters, characters are fully explored and developed. The two narrative voices maintain their authenticity with impressive consistency; they are distinct without being hokey or relying on unrealistic teenage dialects.

Idyllwild Eliot's *Well Below Heaven* is a gritty young adult novel that will warrant comparisons to the work of Laurie Halse Anderson or Walter Dean Myers, relating stories of adolescent challenges without condescending or moralizing.

CONSTANCE AUGUSTA A. ZABER (January 17, 2019)

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