

Amy and Isabelle

Elizabeth Strout

New York: Random House, 1998

Reviewed by Renee Norman

This novel is about longing, desire and pain. It is about secrets and lies: how they distance us from our/selves and those we love. It is also about reconstruction in the face of rage, deep hurt, and the ravages of life. How we keep on going in spite of everything. And how everydayness is the mainstay of our lives. But mostly, this is a story about a mother and a daughter, a story that is often difficult and sad, yet filled with the hope that comes out of life lived and love which survives tempestuous forces.

Isabelle Goodridge is a single mother raising a daughter, Amy, now 16, in Shirley Falls, a small town which could be anywhere, vaguely set during the hippie/bellbottom era. (The reference to some minor characters' French Canadian background led me to wondering if the setting was supposed to be Canadian.)

The novel begins as we follow Isabelle to work at the mill where she is secretary to Avery Clark. It is one of the most humid, languid summers ever. Amy joins her mother, who has secured her a summer job. As the tension of the summer heat and relationships begin to simmer and boil, the story of why Amy looks with disgust over at her mother begins to unravel.

Flashing back to Amy's last few months of school, her awkwardness, loneliness and disconnection are sensitively portrayed in the halls and classrooms of a public high school. Amy's invisibility among the cliques rang so true, I couldn't help but reflect on my own similar high school experiences, as well as the current ordeals of my own teenage daughters.

Elizabeth Strout treats this subject with honesty and realism, as we learn how the vulnerable Amy falls in love with her Math teacher. This substitute teacher, so different from the older woman temporarily away on sick leave, makes all the students feel more alive with the difference in routine. But the attention he directs to Amy is subtle, clever, laden with suggestive undertones.

Amy's dull life for once seems to hold excitement and possibility and she is drawn to him.

As the story of her sexual awakening (and seduction) unfolds, her mother's story begins to heat up like the weather. The image of the stagnant river which runs through the town acts as a counterpoint to the drama which evolves between mother and daughter, adolescent and teacher. The discovery of Amy's relationship with the teacher lets loose a torrent of events and emotions, with a satisfying dénouement, making this novel a good old-fashioned read as well

as a forum for discussing some important issues:

- the invisibility of women
- the vulnerability of adolescent girls
- mother-daughter relations
- educational ethics
- reporting inappropriate teacher conduct
- the pleasures of sexuality
- the importance of openness and communication.

I handed the novel to my own 15-year-old daughter to read. WARNING: I'd rate this book 14A with PG as there are a couple of explicit sexual scenes and one mother-daughter episode which left me feeling way less guilty about my own transgressions.

Those who would like to see the novel's men (who cause great pain to women) punished will be disappointed. But the strength that the women develop in themselves and their friendships partly makes up for such injustice.

I'm betting this is a movie within a year. If so, it would be a refreshing change from the kill-the-mother-off genre of the latest string of mother movies.