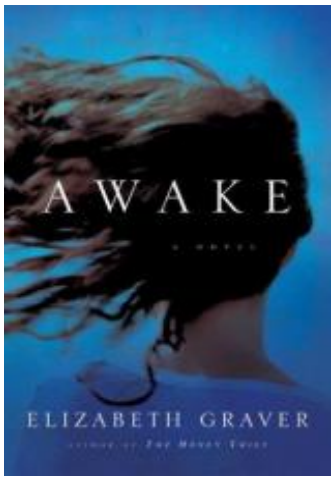
Awake

by Elizabeth Graver



About the Book

Once a painter, a traveler, a lover of light, Anna Simon has been living in the dark ever since she gave birth to Max, a child with a rare genetic disease for whom even an hour in sunlight could prove fatal. For years, Anna has home schooled Max and structured her life around his, despite the fact that her husband, Ian, favors mainstreaming. When Anna learns of a camp in upstate New York for children with the disease, she sees room for a compromise-a sanctuary for Max, a place where he can interact with other children and be both safe and free.

And so the summer that Max is nine, the family heads off to Camp Luna. At first, it seems like the answer to their problems. But as Anna is drawn into life there and gets to know Hal, the camp's charismatic founder, freedom and safety prove to be complicated things. What begins as a novel about a mother with a sick child quickly becomes an intricate examination of one woman's identity as Anna-given sudden breathing room-looks around at her life and finds that she has lost track of essential pieces of herself. What, exactly, are safety and freedom? And at what cost-to one's self and the people in one's life-should they be protected and pursued?

Discussion Guide

1. After Max is born, Anna gives up her painting and devotes herself to caring for and later teaching her child. Adam, the first-born son, initially wants his baby brother returned to the hospital; Ian, the father, is in denial. How does the addition of a chronically ill child into a family reshape family dynamics? Is it possible for Anna and Ian to reconcile the fact that one parent wants to mainstream the child and the other wants to protect him from the outside world? What drives their different desires?

2. What is the nature of Anna's relationship to Hal at the beginning of **Awake**? What draws her to him? What scares her off?

3. How does the author use the metaphors of light and darkness in the novel to track the internal changes and contradictions of the characters? What about images of inside and outside? Of water? Of skin ?

4. Early in the novel, Hal states that 'no former rules apply" at Camp Luna. What does he mean here? How do the various inversions and reversals of Camp Luna intersect with Anna's own desires and fears?

5. On page 74, Anna asks, "Is it possible to be unhappy for a long time and never know it, or is unhappiness a distorting lens you train back on your life once you're standing in a whole new place?" Discuss this statement.

6. At times Anna and Ian both contemplate the idea of Max's death. How do each of them handle this (see pages 27, 107, 283)? What are the different ways in which the other characters in the novel-Adam, Max, Hal, Alida-deal with real or prospective loss?

7. On page 228, when Max, Alida and Anna are eating tomatoes in the garden, Max gets irritated with his mother and tells her that grown-ups aren't supposed to be "a mess" . Does Max understand what is happening? How is Anna's desire to protect Max altered by her affair with Hal? What do you think the long-term repercussions on the mother/son relationship will be?

8. The writer Robin Hemley observes that "it's tempting, sometimes, to make characters either too good or too evil, to give them, as in old Westerns, black hats or white hats. But most people are neither all good nor all bad, and even the best are capable of small and large betrayals." Talk about how this comment applies to the characters in **Awake**.

9. Discuss the ending of the novel. How resolved do things feel by the last page? Where do see these people in a year? In ten?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Graver is the author of THE END OF THE POINT, a novel set in a summer community on Buzzard?s Bay from 1942 to 1999. She has also written three other novels: AWAKE, THE HONEY THIEF and UNRAVELLING.

Her short story collection, HAVE YOU SEEN ME?, won the 1991 Drue Heinz Literature Prize. Her work has been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories* (1991, 2001); *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards* (1994, 1996, 2001), *The Pushcart Prize Anthology* (2001), and *Best American Essays* (1998). Graver's story ?The Mourning Door? was award the Cohen Prize from *Ploughshares* magazine. The mother of two daughters, Elizabeth Graver teaches English and Creative Writing at Boston College.

Critical Praise

"Through the eyes of this wonderful heroine, what begins as a fascinating account of a foreign world--a rare ordeal that most of us will never endure--quickly flowers into the painfully beautiful tale of any parent's heart. How the best of our passions make us both brave and foolish, how we can never quite balance what we must give away and what we have a

right to keep for ourselves, how much more elusive wisdom becomes once we have children: Tackling some of the thorniest mysteries of love, Elizabeth Graver has written a novel of moral gravity as well as emotional suspense."

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