Saving Elijah

by Fran Dorf



About the Book

Psychologist Dinah Rosenberg Galligan is living every mother?s nightmare: her youngest child, Elijah, has fallen into a life-threatening coma. Faced with a seemingly hopeless situation, Dinah meets the mysterious Seth Lucien, a spirit with a surprising connection to her past. Lucien promises to help Elijah emerge from his coma but at a devastating cost: the miracle comes only after Dinah enters into a Faustian bargain; her son is saved, but her entire world begins to crumble

At its core, Saving Elijah is a gripping literary tale of a mother?s love set against a struggle with faith. Laced with humor and passion, the novel confronts a multitude of psychological and philosophical issues, from the forces that bind a family together, to the nightmarish underside of modern life-saving technology, to what it means to be human.

Fran Dorf on Saving Elijah

After I lost my son in 1994, I was incapacitated with grief. I was convinced I?d never be capable of writing another novel. At some point, however, I decided that I needed to write another book, because I didn?t know what else to do with myself. But how was I going to find a theme other than grief, when my grief was so huge? Yet grief it was, and I vowed I would try to be true to the psychological devastation that serious bereavement produces, as I felt and observed it in myself, and saw it in others.

Through many early drafts, I struggled to write a conventional novel about a woman whose marriage had broken up after the loss of a child, telling her story mostly in flashback. Perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, I found that the more I fictionalized, separating my own experience from my characters?, the more cathartic the writing became. Several years into the process, an acquaintance, after hearing that I had lost a child, stared for a moment, then muttered, "Anything but that, anything but that." Many people had that reaction, as if the parent were given a choice in the matter. But the fact is you do try to bargain with God. I can?t imagine who wouldn?t, even a nonbeliever. My life for my child?s.

I turned my plot inside out, and before long the ghost called Seth Lucien appeared, in all his taunting grandeur, as the vehicle for a Faustian bargain, in a story that takes the reader, and my character Dinah, into the very heart of grief and loss and faith.

While on one level Saving Elijah is a supernatural thriller, the ghost doesn?t just walk into the story to scare us. The reader is already terrified by the situation. The ghost is Dinah?s disembodied self, her wrecked "ego" in psychological terms, playing her life back to her, blocking her normal coping mechanisms, personifying the grief and guilt that any parent would feel in such a situation: "Where did I go wrong? What could I have done differently?"

With his running commentary on the action, the ghost?who shares certain qualities with the dybbuk (evil spirit) of Jewish folk legend? also functions as a Greek chorus, albeit a lunatic one. Since a ghost doesn?t have to observe human rules of decorum, he can tease, play mind-games, philosophize, joke, and shock, which seems about right in the surreal world of a pediatric intensive care unit. I put the ghost into competition with the horrific events of the story. True life wins for horror, and Seth is the comic relief?sort of.

I hope that Saving Elijah, while moving readers and compelling them to turn the pages, makes them think. As Seth might say, "Let the play begin."

Discussion Guide

1. Saving Elijah opens with three quotations that are intimately tied to the themes of the novel. In what ways do they enhance the story being told? Which quotation do you feel has the greatest impact on the reader in relation to Dinah?s story, and why?

2.Why does the author juxtapose the ghost with the real-life horrors that Dinah faces in the PICU? How does the ghost?s attack on Dinah personify the bereavement process? How does his voice alter the mood of the novel?

3. The idea that every human being has decisions to make in life is a significant theme in all literature, including Saving Elijah. In addition to the Faustian bargain proposed by the ghost, what other decisions is Dinah faced with? How do her experiences or personality influence the choices she ultimately makes?

4. Life support is a complicated question about which there are diverse opinons, as is evident in the novel. How do the background and beliefs (religious, political, ethical, medical) of each of the characters influence their opinions about this question? Are you surprised by any of these opinions? What are your views, and how have they been shaped by your background or beliefs? Does the novel as a whole take a stand on the question of life support, and if so, what is it?

5. What effect is achieved by the author?s decision to tell the story from Dinah?s point of view? How might the novel differ if it were told by an impartial narrator or in alternating voices?

6. In your opinion, is Dinah?s encounter with the ghost a figment of her imagination or an actual religious experience? Can an outside observer differentiate between the two?

7. What impact does Dinah?s mother have on her daughter?s actions? To what extent is Dinah?s marriage influenced by

her severed relationship with Julie? To what degree does guilt play a role in their separation?

8. Why do you think Dinah reacts so strongly and negatively to Dr. Moore? Did the diverse temperaments and approaches of the physicians in the book surprise you?

9. The psychiatrist Dr. Kessler defines compassion as "willingness to be close to suffering." Why do you think Dinah can?t see it this way at that moment, focusing instead on the "babblers, advice-givers and pain-minimizers," as she calls them? In your own experience, as either a recipient or giver of compassion, are people mostly willing to be "close to suffering"?

10. Why does Dinah reject the traditional trappings of her own profession, such as grief support or personal therapy? Do you think that such a character would eventually seek help from these sources?

11. The word "closure" is often used to express the resolution of grief. Do you think Dinah has achieved it or will achieve it? Does "closure" accurately describe the most desirable outcome for anyone?s grief?

12. What is the function of the various life stories presented in the narrative, particularly those of Dinah?s mother and the elderly writers? Why do you think the author chose not to reveal the details of Ellen Shoenfeld?s Holocaust experience?

Author Bio

Fran Dorf was born in a Philadelphia suburb in 1953. As a teenager, she read constantly, particularly science fiction, and wrote poetry and stories; she began working on a novel at age sixteen. She also sketched and painted, and studied piano for many years. After graduating from Boston University?s School of Public Communication in 1975, she worked variously as a waitress, secretary, exercise instructor, publisher for a small startup newspaper, nursing home attendant, public relations executive, advertising writer, therapist, and fund-raiser.

While Dorf has never studied creative writing in a formal setting, she believes her eclectic and voracious reading habits have helped her tremendously in her writing as has her powerful fascination with psychology. Indeed in 1985 she received a master?s degree in psychology from New York University. Five years later she published her first novel, A Reasonable Madness, a psychological thriller about a psychiatrist and one of his patients. A second novel, Flight, followed in 1992. Both were Literary Guild selections and received critical acclaim in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere.

Although these novels explore human passions and combine elements of mystery with magical or supernatural touches, they are primarily thrillers. Saving Elijah is a departure. The tragic death of her son has had a "profound effect" on her life, she says. She hopes it has had a profound, transforming, and deepening effect on her work as well.

Fran Dorf lives near New York City with her husband. They have a daughter in college.

Visit Fran Dorf, or read an excerpt from Saving Elijah, at http://www.frandorf.com

Critical Praise

"A moving tale of a mother haunted by the grave illness of her son and by a demon from her past. But it is more: a rich and compelling story of faith, grief, guilt, ghosts, God, and ultimately, hope. "

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