

ABOUT THE BOOK

Our Daily Bread is a novel about what happens when we view our neighbours as “The Other” and the transformative power of unlikely friendships.

The God-fearing people of Gideon shun the Erskine Clan, who have lived on North Mountain in poverty, secrecy and isolation, believing their neighbours to be beyond salvation. “That’s the mountain,” they say. “What do you expect from those people?” Yet in both groups nearly everyone has secrets, and nothing is as it seems.

On the mountain, Albert Erskine dreams of a better and safer life for his younger brothers and sisters. He lives by his code: “You keep your secrets to yourself and you keep your weaknesses a secret and your hurts a secret and your dreams you bury double deep.” In town, young Ivy Evans is relentlessly bullied by her classmates. Though her father, Tom, is a well-liked local, his troubled marriage to a restless outsider is a source of gossip. As rumours and innuendo about the Evans family spread, Ivy seeks refuge in Dorothy Carlisle, an independent-minded widow who runs a local antique store.

When Albert ventures down the mountain and seizes on the Evanses’ family crisis as an opportunity to befriend Ivy’s vulnerable teenage brother, Bobby, he sets in motion a chain of events that changes everything.

LAUREN B. DAVIS ON THE STORY BEHIND *OUR DAILY BREAD*

I write to figure out what I think about things and to attempt to find meaning. I try to find metaphors through which to explore my feelings about what obsesses me. One of the things I’ve been troubled by in the past few years is the increasing polarization I see around me. It pops up in any number of places—religion, politics (both local and international), public rhetoric, the media, and the like. We don’t have to look far for examples—perhaps no farther than our prisons, or the town next door, or even our own families.

As I pondered these ever-widening gaps, a story from my past kept rising to the surface. I lived in Nova Scotia for a brief time in the early 1970s. While there, I heard stories about a community based on a nearby mountain. They were terrible stories, involving incest, aborted and deformed babies, prostitution, and so forth. I told myself that these dreadful tales couldn’t be true. I believed, naïvely, that if they were true, surely someone would have done something. Then, a decade later, one of the children of the Goler Clan told her story of generational abuse to a teacher. This teacher came from another province and hadn’t been in Nova Scotia very long. She in turn called an RCMP officer, who was also new to the community. They insisted an investigation begin, and eventually many of the clan’s adult members were put in jail and the children placed in foster care.

I was horrified, but also mystified. If all those rumours had been true, why had it taken so long for someone to intervene? The answer seemed to be that the people who lived on the mountain had, for generations, been considered “Those People,” as in “What do you expect from those people?” The residents of the prosperous Annapolis Valley nearby, who lived in communities founded on Puritanical religious principles hundreds of years earlier, believed their neighbours were so “Other” as to be beyond the pale.

The extreme marginalization of the community and the terrible repercussions of ostracism haunted me. The episode seemed the perfect framework for exploring how such ordinary people could do such dreadful things, or permit such dreadful things to continue.

I have had several instances in my own life of feeling like the “Other.” Although I explore the theme more personally in my previous novel, *The Stubborn Season*, in which a young girl battles the tyranny of living with a mentally ill mother during the Great Depression, the character of Ivy Evans in *Our Daily Bread* is based on some of my own experiences with marginalization. My family, afflicted by mental illness and alcoholism, was going through a rough time the summer I was nine. I was an only child, adopted, bookish and prone to making up stories, all of which helped to make me an outsider in the eyes of some of my peers. That summer, a lady who owned a little antique shop near my house let me hang around the store. I’m sure she never knew how much that meant to me. It was a refuge from loneliness and bullying, and I’ve never forgotten it.

AN INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN B. DAVIS

The Goler Clan trials inspired your novel. How difficult was it to write about that type of activity?

It was awful. What went on up there was ghastly in the extreme. Whereas, in non-fiction, I think an author can, and should, speak the facts exactly as they are, as a fiction writer I’m trying not simply to state a chronological series of events, but to explore some greater truth or question inspired by those events. Thus, I chose not to include some of what I learned during my research, simply because it was too hideous for fiction, too gag-inducing. I didn’t want to write a book that either exploited the victims or was too salacious. I did, however, use some of the court testimony verbatim in the final chapter. I had nightmares and shed tears, I can tell you that.

Is there any particular message you are trying to pass on through the book?

I was trying to explore what happens when we view our neighbours as “The Other” and also to look at the transforming power of unlikely friendships. I don’t really write “message” books; I merely hope the reader will ask himself some questions he might not have otherwise. My own conclusion, by the time I’d finished writing the book, was that I do have a responsibility to try and live more empathetically, to speak up wherever I perceive an injustice, and to refuse to banish someone to “Otherness.”

There certainly are a lot of “Others” in the book: Albert is an outsider to his own family, as is Ivy to the other kids, Bobby to his family, and even Tom and Patty as unmarried parents in a Bible-thumping town. How many classes of “Other” do you think there are in a typical community?

That would depend on the community, but when you consider all the potential divides—religious, economic, racial, gender, not to mention all the boundaries erected through conflicts over land, or noise, or behaviour, or personal slights of one sort or another—the possibilities are endless. I wanted to encourage people to ask themselves who might be considered “Other” in their own communities and what they were willing to do to perhaps cross that divide.

While the Erskines are to Gideon as the Golars were to Wolfville, your book focuses more on the various outsiders within the town itself. Are you trying to make any particular statement?

Well, for one thing, I wasn’t writing *Deliverance* (fine work though that may be). I didn’t want the reader to spend the entire novel gawking at the horrors of mountain life; I felt that was simply too exploitive and salacious. What we see in the opening of the novel resonates, I hope, through the rest of the text, even when the focus is on the townspeople.

I think it's easy to point a finger at people we have decided, for any number of reasons, are different from us and call them outsiders, but sometimes we do the most damage closer to home. Sometimes the people we relegate to societies' hinterlands are our family members, our classmates and our neighbours.

Which character do you view as the most tragic figure in the book?

Albert, I think. He's held back from what he desires not only by the external conflicts of his appalling relations, the weight of family history and society's expectations, but also because he has been so damaged, so broken, by what's happened to him. He has, in many ways, accepted society's judgment and doesn't really believe he could ever break free of it. Still, he tries so hard, in his way. There's an irony here because hopefully the reader sees something fine in him, albeit under a layer of grime, but still some seed of potential that Albert himself can't see.

Then, too, Patty is a tragic figure, since she has so little understanding of herself. I think many of us have, alas, known people like this—restless, irritable and discontent, always looking for the next bright, shiny thing. You think, “Good Lord, doesn't she know how good she has it? Will nothing ever make her happy?” Watching a person like that self-destruct is heartbreaking.

You've said that Ivy's character is based somewhat on a rough summer in your own life. How much so, and how true is Dorothy to the woman who owned the antique shop near your house? How important was she to you getting through that period?

Dorothy is a combination of several women I've known, but certainly she is true to my *memory* of the woman who owned the antique store. She was a haven, and a sanctuary and a life-saver.

Are any of the town's residents based on people you knew while you lived in Nova Scotia?

No, they aren't. I hope I've made it quite clear that although the story is inspired by the Goler Clan, I'm not really writing about Nova Scotia. I wanted to create a fictional town that could be anywhere, and hopefully readers all over might even think it could be their town. Where I live now, in Princeton, New Jersey, people have asked me if I'm writing about the Ramapo Mountain people, or about a group known as “The Hopewell Hillbillies”—so I like to think I succeeded.

Which character is the most intriguing to you?

I keep coming back to Albert. There's something about a person struggling against such great odds, with so little help, that just pierces me. What might have been? I keep asking. What might have been?

Grateful acknowledgement is given to Ian Fairclough for permission to reproduce interview questions originally from Halifax's Chronicle Herald.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Our Daily Bread* is an examination of what happens when we view our neighbours as “The Other.” Is there anyone considered “The Other” or “one of those people” in your community? What about in your family or at work? How is the us-versus-them struggle in Gideon an emblem of conflict in your country, in the world community and in the human heart?

2. Lauren B. Davis suggests that religious intolerance is a significant contributor to the way the Erskine Clan is treated. Do you think religion brings people together or divides them? Is *Our Daily Bread* a book

about specifically Christian issues? Could the story just as easily be set in a Muslim or Jewish or Hindu society?

3. Although the child abuse in the story never happens “on stage,” apart from a brief scene in the first chapter, it haunts the story and has gone on, we learn, for generations. What do you think contributed to this breakdown of the family unit and of societal and moral norms?

4. How do Albert, Bobby and Ivy compare to one another? What do they tell us about growing up? How does role reversal shape them? What traits, responsibilities and fears have they inherited?

5. The townspeople of Gideon can justify not protecting the children of the Erskine clan because they believe the adults’ behaviour places the children beyond redemption. Do you agree with this reasoning?

6. Dorothy Carlisle steps in to help the Evans family during a difficult period and to act as a kind of surrogate grandmother to Ivy. Has anyone in your life helped you in this way, or have you ever reached out to someone?

7. Dorothy leaves packages at the Erskine compound and refuses to condemn Albert Erskine, even when the rest of the community vilifies him. Still, she feels she hasn’t done enough. What do you think? What more might she have done, or should she not have involved herself?

8. The impetus for change in *Our Daily Bread* comes from the unusual friendships formed between characters, such as Albert and Bobby, or Dorothy and Ivy. Chance encounters, such as Jane’s meeting Albert, or Albert’s meeting an elderly woman during a break-in, are also agents of transformation. What do you think it is about these meetings that effects change? How do the meetings change the characters’ perceptions of themselves and one another?

9. When he befriends Bobby Evans, Albert sees himself as a sort of mentor. What do you think of that relationship? Why does Albert want to be Bobby’s friend? And what does Bobby see in Albert?

10. At the end of the book, Dorothy leaves Gideon. Do you think she made the right decision? What would you have done?

11. Albert struggles between wanting to stay on the mountain and protect the younger children and wanting to escape. What would have happened, do you think—to the clan, to the children and to Albert himself—if he had chosen to leave?

12. How does the reader function as a witness in *Our Daily Bread*? Does this witnessing change the reader? If so, in what way?