



The Summer of Ordinary Ways: A Memoir

Nicole Lea Helget

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Practicing baseball with Dad, then watching him go after a cow with a pitchfork in a fit of rage. Playing chicken on the county road with semi trucks full of hogs. Flirting with the milkman. Chasing with your sisters after Wreck and Bump, mangy mutts who prowl farmsteads killing chickens and drinking fuel oil. Dandelion wine. The ghost of a girl buried alive over a century ago. These unforgettable, sometimes hilarious images spill from a fierce and wondrous childhood into the pages of *The Summer of Ordinary Ways*.

Praise for *The Summer of Ordinary Ways*:

"Helget's debut begins with a staggering example of her father's brutality: he mercilessly beats a cow to death for not weaning her calf. Yet Helget refuses to succumb to a "woe is me" attitude, and she layers vignettes to create a lyrical story of growing up on a Minnesota farm in the 1980s, where her mother verges on insanity, her five unruly younger sisters get underfoot, and death is a familiar part of life. The memoir's charm lies in Helget's dulcet use of language; even as she describes the century-old death of a little girl accidentally buried alive, her words sing: "Colors explode behind her lids, the colors of poppies and apples and straw and cantaloupe and leaves and Monarchs and stars and sky. And yet... she struggles to open her eyes.... it's black where she is." The amalgamation of reminiscences appears random until the final piece, in which Helget weaves an account of her child self with that of her adult self, providing context for the previous memories. Pregnant and married at 19, lonely and isolated, Helget tantalizes with a brief peek at her adulthood, but it's enough, because the glimpses into her younger life so satisfyingly explain who she has become."

—Publishers Weekly starred review

"Born in 1976, first-time author Helget grew up in Sleepy Eye, Minn., a deeply parochial place where her family tended 80 acres. Her father was a reluctant farmer—he played Triple-A ball for five years before the Red Sox let him go in 1977—and her mother was a reluctant parent, despite bearing six daughters. They rode an emotional roller coaster: Dad would lose himself in fierce moods, at one point pitch-forking a cow to death when it would not leave her calf, another time striking his wife with a blazing hot pan; Mom would retreat into silent glooms and lock herself away, emerging only for Sunday church services. Yet Helget also depicts her father as "a man who can be so lovely sometimes that you and your sisters collect under the wonder of him" and writes with sympathy of the genes that held her mother captive. She carries those genes herself, the author finds. "We have a way of making a man love us and suffer him for doing it," she notes of herself and her sisters. "While we love our babies, we detest ourselves and wrestle against anything and everything to deny and prove it." Mercifully, Helget also tells stories of a different tone that let the reader catch a breath: One concerns Wreck and Bump, two lowly but ambitious mutts bent on fornication and chicken meat, drinking moonshine and motor oil. Most of the chapters, it must be admitted, are overcast with bleakness—what a wonder it is, then, that Helget's storytelling feels so fresh and vital. Beautifully crafted, each chapter a balanced and snug set piece with sentences as carefully constructed as a stone wall." —Kirkus Reviews

"Helget breaks open the tough shell of family life to reveal a girlhood both tragic and lovely, with all its hidden violence, all its secret beauty." —Carolyn Parkhurst, author of *The Dogs of Babel*

"Helget wrings intensity from the seemingly mundane—a family farm, the kitchen, a sleepy Midwestern town—to recreate a past that lives on somewhere between a dream and a nightmare. In *The Summer of Ordinary Ways*, every detail is authentic and resonant, every moment feels lived. Helget's debut is nothing short of remarkable." —Rosellen Brown, author of *Tender Mercies*

"Marvelous, vibrant, and full of gritty energy, carrying the reader on a breathless ride across hills and valleys of pain, humor, and redemption." —Faith Sullivan, author of *The Cape Ann*

"Written with blistering beauty, this fierce memoir is an elegy for broken spirits—human and animal—and a prayer for those able to face their past. " —Bart Schneider, author of *Beautiful Inez*

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