

books JEN MABE



Bonnie Shimko gracefully understates the coming out of an adolescent girl on a journey of self-discovery in 'Letters in the Attic.'

Discovering a whole person

LIZZY MCMANN IS A PRECOCIOUS 12-year-old right from the start. Who can blame her? After all, she has to play the role of the mother while her mother behaves like a child.

Bonnie Shimko's debut novel, 'Letters in the Attic,' opens with Lizzy and her mother in a dingy, dirty, second-rate motel room that they share with Lizzy's father Manny.

Lizzy pretends to sleep as Manny tells Mama that he wants a divorce. He has met 'the harlot' (as Lizzy and her mother refer to Sylvia Bushey) and wants to marry her instead of staying with his family.

The divorce forces the pair to move in with Lizzy's grandparents — an exciting change for Lizzy, who is ready for a new start.

Grandpa, a warm, kind, affectionate man, is the opposite of Lizzy's grandmother, a cold, condescending woman who resents her daughter (and in turn, her granddaughter) for having run away with Manny years earlier. Grandmother is satisfied that, just as she predicted, Manny has run off with another woman and left her behind.

The months pass, and Lizzy begins to form a new life, just as she had dreamed.

Then she meets Eva, the girl down the street who looks like Natalie Wood and has trouble in school. They quickly form a bond, but Lizzy is painfully aware that her feelings for Eva are not what they should be.

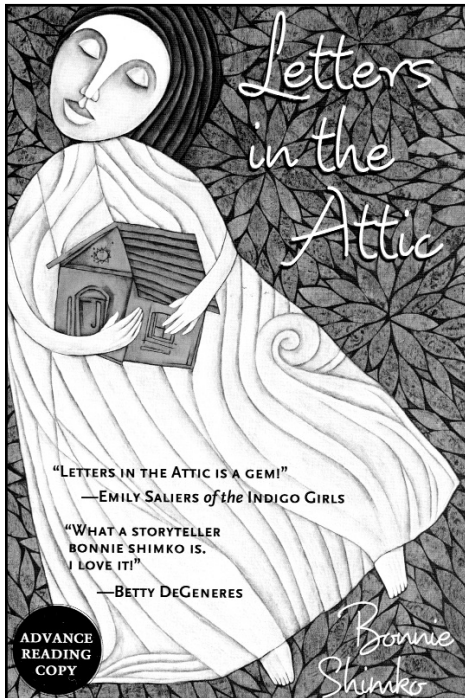
Lizzy recognizes her feelings for Eva as love, and struggles with the fact that she is "queer."

But it is life with Mama that complicates her life.

The discovery of who she is in relation to her mother, her friends, her father and her grandparents is what consumes Lizzy's life. Her sexual orientation is a gracefully understated subplot.

THIS WELL-WRITTEN BOOK HAS AN engaging, realistic plot. Readers can identify with Shimko's characters, and her vivid descriptions create clear pictures.

But while Shimko's picture-perfect



detail provides the book with some of its highlights, the technique also can be a drawback, slowing down the narrative instead of moving it along.

There also is a lack of investment in some of the characters in this book, which is another weakness. The main characters — Lizzy, Mama, Manny, Grandmother and Grandpa — are all well developed. But there are central characters who leave the reader wanting more, understating their importance to the plot.

Nevertheless, as a whole, this is an enjoyable read. Lizzy trudges her way through adolescence discovering her sexuality, but more importantly she discovers her identity as a whole person.

The book survives its few drawbacks. Perhaps most engaging are the tidbits of wisdom — from its 12-year-old heroine — that seem to jump out in the most unexpected places. Lizzy knows much more than her age lets on.

"You can't fake your way through your life with a shield wrapped around your thoughts, pretending that everything is OK and that you don't really care," Lizzy says. "But when you let your guard down, your true feelings come rushing home to roost like a flock of ravens to devour your dead heart, and the loneliness of the whole thing barrels into you with such force you can hardly stand it."

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