

I'd turn back if I were you

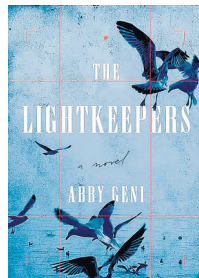
Abby Geni's first full-length novel places her heroine on an island of great beauty and great danger

BY MEREDITH MARAN

Some of the best novels start with the most unlikely and most unappealing premises. One case in point: the runaway best-seller-turned-movie “The Lovely Bones.” Imagine author Alice Sebold pitching the concept to her publisher: “Teenage girl is raped and murdered, then watches from her perch in heaven as her loved ones struggle to survive in the aftermath.” What were the odds?

“The Lightkeepers” is another such book, and it deserves that level of attention. Part murder mystery, part psychological thriller, part ode to one of the western world's wildest landscapes, this dark, compelling tale is an astonishingly ambitious debut. Fortunately, author Abby Geni has the pedigree and the chops to make risky moves. A graduate of the vaunted Iowa Writers' Workshop, Geni previously published a story collection (“The Last Animal,” 2013) and short stories in publications including *Glimmer Train* and “Best American Short Stories 2010.” In this, her first work of long-form fiction, Geni shuns predictable protocols of plot, character and setting. Taking a leap off the literary cliff is not for wimps. It's a testament to Geni's skills that she takes her readers with her.

The cliff, in this case, is steep — and covered with gull guano. We meet Geni's protagonist, thirty-something Miranda, a nature photographer, as she's en route to the Farallon Islands, an exotic archipelago 30 miles off the San Francisco coast. Not for nothing are the Farallons closed to the public and known as “The Islands of the Dead.” Tripping and falling — sometimes fatally — while navigating the rocky terrain is nearly unavoidable. Offshore, sharks the size of stretch limos circle the islands. Onshore, residents



The Lightkeepers

By Abby Geni,
Counterpoint, 361
pages, \$25

include 25,000 gulls, 60,000 mice, and elephant seals — all of them violent, as illustrated Hitchcock-style late in the novel.

The terrain and the wildlife Miranda encounters, though, seem downright hospitable compared to her human co-inhabitants. She joins six biologists who are living and working on the island in a single cabin, surviving on shipped-in food that's almost as unappetizing as most of them are.

In a 2013 interview about “The Last Animal,” Geni told *Publishers Weekly*, “One of the great illusions of the human experience is that we are somehow outside of nature — beyond the food chain — that we are not animals ourselves. I hope to both explore and challenge that illusion.” Geni exceeds that goal in “The Lightkeepers” thanks to a plot so twist-laden, it's hard to reference it without issuing a profusion of spoiler alerts. Suffice it to say that one can almost hear the ominous soundtrack swell as Miranda's island-mates justify, again and again, the distrust and antipathy she feels toward them. After Miranda takes a painful fall and is overrun by thousands of mice, they treat her wounds indifferently and nickname her “mouse girl.” When a shark surfaces near their research boat, they urge Miranda to pet it. “(I) drew my hand away

with a cry of pain,” Miranda says. “My fingertips were bleeding. It looked as though I had used a cheese grater on them. Behind me, I heard Forest chortle. Everything in this place ... was dangerous.”

Despite — or maybe because of — the cruelty and danger of her situation, Miranda surrenders to the wild beauty of the island. Although Geni renders this shift imperfectly, leaving the reader to wonder why Miranda was bereft one day and suddenly in love with her surroundings the next, Geni's lush prose leaves no doubt about the reasons for Miranda's change of heart.

“They come in the late autumn, passing the islands in droves,” she writes. “I have seen them sliding through the sea like nightmares. Despite their size, the whales have an elusive quality. They camouflage themselves as waves, as clouds, as islets, as reflections of light.” Miranda finds beauty, too, in phenomena that might seem frightening in the hands of a lesser writer. “The bats began to rise. It happened all at once, as though they had received a command. I could see them spiraling upward in a column of smoky gray. Their wings shook the air.”

“
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— From ‘The Lightkeepers’ by Abby Geni

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Like many literary classics and novels that are destined to be classics, “The Lightkeepers” raises questions about humanity that are anything but light. Unlike many classics, it's an accessible page-turner whose surprises, both fictional and stylistic, unfold so satisfyingly that the novel is also a pleasure to read.

Meredith Maran is the author of “Why We Write About Ourselves: Twenty Memoirists on Why They Expose Themselves (and Others) in the Name of Literature.”



Dan Kelleghan photo