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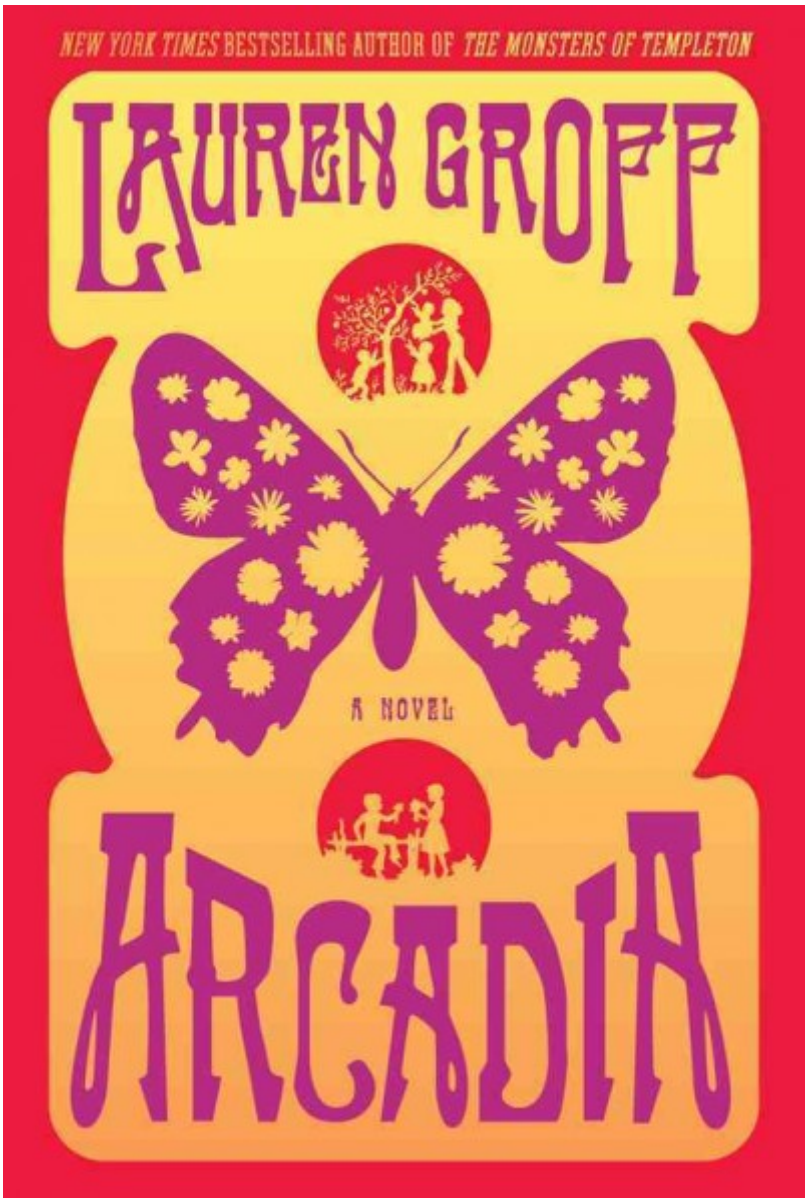
The Lost Hippies of New York State



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ISBN:
9781401340872

During the Byzantine Empire, the Greek district of Arcadia was famous for being a simple pastoral place where people, mostly herdsmen, lived at peace in nature. Later writers described it as a kind of Utopia. In Lauren Groff?s intriguing second novel, *Arcadia* [2] becomes a place of both good and evil: a New York state commune where people share idealistic dreams but never fully translate them into reality.

Bit Stone, a tiny scrawling kid, is the first child born on the commune after visionaries and druggies complete a nomadic journey across the country from the west coast. This group decides to create an intentional community of shared work and dreams. And what an

intelligent, enquiring boy this protagonist is.
Although the author was too young to experience the late 60s and early 70s, she does an amazing job of capturing the feel of the era (except for those cassettes which had not become popular yet.)

Groff?s sentences are lush and musical--the kind you read several times just to enjoy the interplay of sounds and meaning. She paints vivid scenes--one of Bit running barefoot through the snow to a kind of fairy godmother?s house in the wood. In another scene, as a young teenager, Bit guides a woman through labor with his intense stare and obvious compassion.

Bit has been blessed with good parents, trustworthy Abe, a builder, who is one of the few to confront the commune?s leader, and Hannah, a baker who sometimes suffers from depression. It?s rare to find parents so lovingly portrayed in any novel.

The emotional intensity of the novel is high. Of course, there are villains, the commune?s leader is the main one?he smokes dope and sleeps with the young women and adamantly refuses to help in the working drudgery of day-to-day life on the commune. And their work is both hard and endless. Commune members are vegetarians but also novice farmers. Every year they fail at producing enough food for the people, including the crowds of disaffected young folk who join them.

One particularly interesting part of the book is Bit?s adjustment to life in New York City as an adult.

At heart, *Arcadia* offers many mysteries. It also raises questions about what makes a good life: is it our relationships, our work, our community, or some of all three?

This book does a fine job of capturing the contradictions, squabbles, and joys of an era that is almost swallowed by history. For dessert, if you haven't read it for awhile, reread Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* [3]. A highly-anticipated movie version will come out in December.

For the Love of Reading[4]Information, Answers & Reviews [5]Acadia [6]

Posted by Dory L. on Oct 31, 2012

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