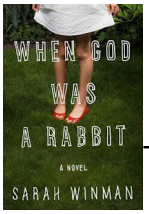
When god was a Rabbit



This debut novel by Sarah Winman, a British actress, is decidedly quirky, unusual and fresh. It's also tremendously well-written and involving, and captures as few novels do, the actual feelings and experiences of childhood. The title absolutely pulled me in. Don't for a moment think it's a metaphor. No way. Little Elly, the narrator, receives a Belgian hare for Christmas and, in a family of nonbelievers, what could be more logical than naming her pet god (lower case, of course)?

When her school hosts a Christmas pageant, Elly receives audition instructions from her gay thespian aunt. The little girl secures a role but not Mary, Joseph, or the Baby Jesus. No, instead Elly plays the blind innkeeper. Unfortunately, in a horrible fiasco, she knocks over another child and sends him to the hospital.

Elly has a best friend named Jenny Penny. Her mom is a single parent with lots of visiting boyfriends. Because she has a drinking problem, Jenny joins Elly's kind but eccentric family.

Every week, Elly, her brother, Joe, and her father play the numbers. Their mom bets also, but even as an eight year old child, Elly realizes that Mum will fail because she uses no system. Amazingly, the Dad eventually wins the jackpot, but their lives do not change until eighteen months later when he drives home from work in a fancy vehicle. Their mum says it's me or those wheels and leaves. The kids hate the car too; Jenny Penney is most upset because as she says, "I don't know which parent to go with, your mom or your dad."

The book does not avoid the seamy side of life--a child abuser lives next door. The children find explicit sex mags in the shed and neighborhood men take advantage of Jenny's mom when she's not sober.

Joe, who is a teenager, has a friend on the rugby team, and they fall in love. Charlie's father takes him to the Middle East where the young man is kidnapped. Back in England, Elly and Joe watch some of this terrifying event on television.

In the second section, the children are grown and Elly meets Jenny Penny again. Her brother Joe lives in New York City when the Twin Towers fall. I won't tell you the story but near the end of the novel, there's a homecoming scene in which a coconut falls out of the sky and despite the fact that two Chinese fortune cookies have predicted that whomever it strikes will die, he does not.

A unique book that explores life and relationships the way that only good novels do. It's also one of those uncommon books that focuses on the sister and brother bond. Another wonderful book about childhood but this time concentrating on two sisters is Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping

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Posted by Dory L. on Oct 24, 2011

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