

More Like Not Running Away

reviewed by [Debra Rienstra](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

In Review



More Like Not Running Away

Paul Shepherd
Sarabande

Paul Shepherd's novel concerns the complex brew of loyalty and judgment that often characterizes relationships between father and son. This impressive debut

novel resembles Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* with its masterful characterization, narrative economy, finely tuned prose and attention to the inner contours of spiritual dilemmas. But in its approach to the father-son theme, Shepherd's novel is completely and fascinatingly opposite *Gilead*, almost like a photographic negative.

The towering figure in the novel is Everest Revel, an explosive man who seeks to provide well for his small family but cannot control his rage. Everest has been running away all his life: from his impoverished childhood, from a violent incident in the army, from the messes his anger makes wherever he goes. He repeatedly promises his wife and two children that he will build them a fine home that meets his high standards as a builder, but he breaks his promise every time.

We see Everest from the point of view of his son, Levi, a boy of about 12. In the best tradition of naive narrators, Levi is a strange boy whose strangeness bears unconscious wisdom. Levi hears voices, sometimes God's voice. He rocks his head back and forth when under stress. He is uncannily sensitive to the world around him.

Shepherd lends his poetic skill to Levi's character and voice as we share in his jumbled, acute senses and their mesmerizing power:

I began to think that I wasn't sick after all, that it was only my skin changing. Before, I'd heard everything with my ears. Some things I knew I wasn't meant to hear, like my parents through my bedroom walls, like my teachers talking about me when they went home, like my dad's voice at school, even when I knew he was at work. I still heard all this, but now I was hearing it in my skin too. I started to hold my arms close to my body, to curl up, even sitting in school, to make myself smaller so I didn't hear as much. . . . Even if I was alone, at night, the boards of the house pulling loose from the nails sent chills through my bed frame, right into my ribs.

For Levi, the world is constantly fragmenting and shifting, giving the novel a kind of skewed balance—as if always teetering on an edge.

Levi's challenge in the novel is to survive his terrifying yet compelling father. The name Everest has obvious connotations: he is the immovable object that this sensitive boy has to admire, run from, go around or climb. Levi's mother and sister face the same challenge and offer alternative approaches. His mother, Nora, is, as Levi puts it, "an admirer of dreams, of grand gestures, of mystery." She gives

Everest years of second chances, trying to maintain the illusion that he is exceptional and just misunderstood. Nevertheless, she always keeps a suitcase packed.

Levi's ten-year-old sister, Carson, meanwhile, is the only character in the novel who has Everest's number. Skeptical and practical, she has no patience with Levi's admiration for their father. When Nora finally makes use of that suitcase and goes to live in Seattle, Carson asks to live with her grandparents.

Levi, however, stays with his father, traveling with him from Michigan to Florida, then across the country on a harrowing road trip to find Nora. Shepherd deftly handles Levi's maturing perspective in the second half of the novel, so I found myself growing in both sympathy and respect for Levi as he is left to fend for himself, including facing his own emerging sexuality with no guidance. More significant, the voices he heard as a child subside, and he is finally left with no buffer between himself and his father's unpredictable destructiveness. Levi's innocent fascination with church and the things of God, and his ambition to become a missionary, fall away. Later he reflects: "I've heard God, and the silence God leaves behind."

Shepherd is particularly interested in what it means that God might turn away from someone, even for a moment. The question at the heart of the novel—why Everest cannot escape his anger no matter how much he runs—is a theological one, and one for which Shepherd does not offer a pat resolution. Instead, he simply lets the question live in the characters, situations and images of his story.

The novel climaxes as Levi makes a critical decision that is "more like not running away." Meanwhile, through a few brief narrative interludes we glimpse Levi's adult future. We learn that he will grow up, go to college and eventually find work building steeples for a boss named Duval. Like Everest, Duval is a builder who insists on doing things right, but his high standards arise from respect rather than disgust. Duval is also a mountain climber who harbors an ambition to climb Mt. Everest someday. Levi's boss hovers on the edge of the novel as a kind of antidote to Everest. Duval models a way to face life not with hostility, but with zeal and even love. His briefly sketched presence suggests that one can find a place of peace and security in an utterly terrifying world by hanging on to the right ropes. At the end of the story Levi is still living on a steep slope, but it's the slope of a church roof.

Shepherd is a builder as well as a writer (he is writer in residence at Florida State University). His practical knowledge of the construction trades lends more than atmosphere to the story; it helps focus a cluster of images related to the difficulty of building anything fine, stable and safe in a dangerous, chaotic world.

To say that I found the novel difficult to read is not a criticism, but simply an acknowledgment of the story's demand that the reader look long and carefully at something dreadful. Though I rejoiced in Levi's climb toward survival, I could not share his admiration for or loyalty to his father. Instead, I felt Carson's anger, impatience and utter dismissal. However, Shepherd succeeded in holding my gaze and showing me that Everest has his own story, his own worthy desires, and an inexplicable helplessness before the rage that controls him. I wanted to look away, but Shepherd, through Levi, compelled me to see.