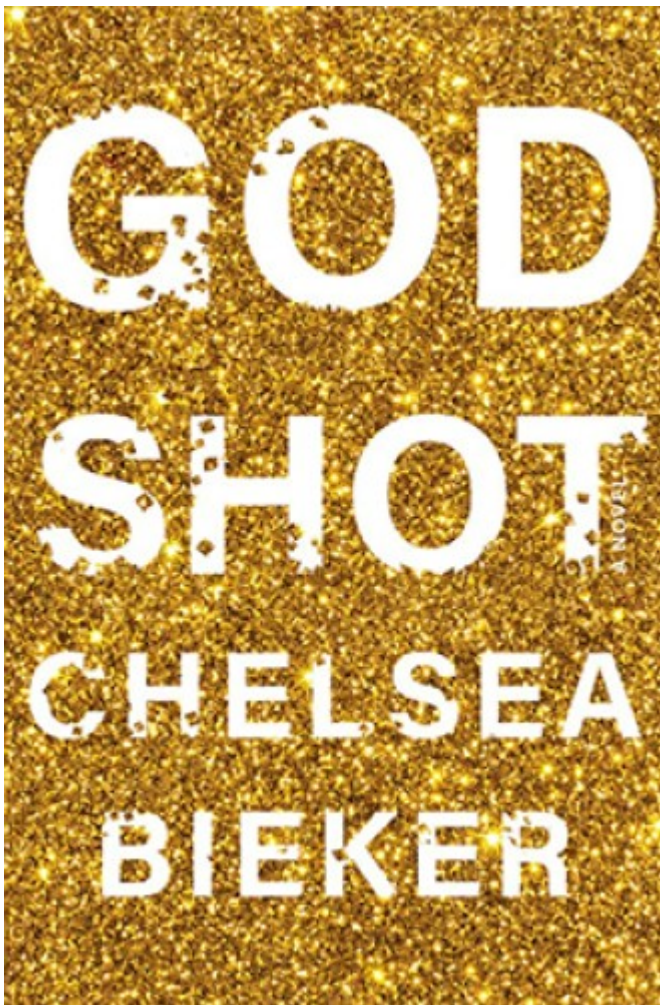


A novel shot through with transcendence

Chelsea Bieker's *Godshot* drips with truth about motherhood, faith, and power.

by [Abigail J. Paxton](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Godshot

A Novel

By Chelsea Bieker

Catapult

The rain falls on the evil and the good. And sometimes it doesn't fall at all. The town of Peaches is in a drought. At 14 years old, Lacey May knows she can help bring the rain. But in the Gifts of the Spirit Church, girls must wait until they become women to receive their secret assignments.

And so it begins with blood: an ominous curtain call for a coming-of-age tale set in a crumbling ghost town. Lacey May doesn't know it, but her life, which once revolved around a beautiful alcoholic mother, has now been overrun by a religious cult.

Godshot, Chelsea Bieker's debut novel, holds nothing back. Every sentence manages to claw at central truths about motherhood, faith, and power. The pages drip with portent, seducing readers, alternating between dread and hope as the characters swing between thirst and gulping down bottles of cold water.

After her mother abandons her, the only adults in Lacey May's life are her grandmother, Cherry, and her pastor, Vern. Vern's fawning congregation believes he can perform miracles. They delight when he preaches and God's glitter falls down from the rafters. They weep and murmur in tongues while he rebaptizes them in pools of sticky soda, the sugar crystallizing on their skin.

Lacey May waits anxiously for Vern to reveal her assignment, eager to make a sacrifice that will bring rain and make the land fertile again. Even so, she is confused when she finally receives it.

"Vern wanted the women pretty because everything God saved was beautiful," she explains while memorizing her mother's beauty regimen. "Nevertheless, it was something of evil to make a man stumble."

Bieker, whom some critics have compared to Flannery O'Connor, injects every scene with the bizarre. Vern glitters in gold, stalking around a pulpit in shimmering capes while Lacey May runs barefoot through town in her mother's unwashed yellow bikini. Her fellow Bible study girls guzzle soda to conserve water, their skin turning green and gaunt, while the church's boys club grows robust on pickled pigs feet and candy bars. "Eat and be well," Vern says in a perverse parable, plucking a single grape from a vine inexplicably grown in his backyard. He holds it to Lacey May's parched lips.

The story battles between maternal and paternal energy. From the onset, Lacey May must choose between obeying her mother's instruction not to tell Pastor Vern about her first blood and her desire to receive a secret assignment from him. "The men of this church have been appointed to lead. . . . It's the holy structure," Vern says.

Bieker pierces Lacey May's search for God with both visceral, messy mother-daughter bonds and the grandiose violence of "God's army" shooting people with the Spirit. The story beckons readers to consider their own ideas of church and power.

As the novel unfolds, the plague of drought deepens. Peaches is far from its glory days as the "raisin queen" of the California valley. The characters grow faint with thirst, cracking open cans of peaches in the middle of grocery stores and slurping down the syrup. Images of decay seep through the pages like a forgotten piece of fruit leaking through the bottom of a bag.

Lacey May scrapes fly larvae from the floorboards of Cherry's house. She plucks her grandmother's chin hairs as Cherry tends her collection of chinchilla furs, setting them up as living playthings. Cherry calls outside from the porch for a cat that died years ago.

"A girl can be fine without a mother," Cherry tells her. But as the realities of her assignment worsen, Lacey May determines to find her mother. Along the way, what she thinks she knows about temptation and saving sinners is upended when she meets the Diviners, a group of water witches.

Lacey May does not know why she flees to the red house filled with glamorous phone sex workers with mysterious pasts. But the Diviners welcome her with open arms and bottles of water to drink. "You are all concerned about water coming from the sky," they tell her, "but there could be water under us right now, untapped." And here Bieker tosses her story into the deep end of a new theology.

Lacey May devises a plan while memories of her mother's drunken nights and violent boyfriends cast her childhood in a new light. She notices the mania in Vern's eyes when he declares her "Godshot." She returns to the red house seeking answers.

A woman now, Lacey May plunges into gritty realities of birth and death. She untangles men's warped desires over the phone lines. She faces men who show up

and paint Cherry's scorched lawn neon green. She reckons with men who dictate what God's plan is for her. Now, she thinks, she must be clever. She must be wild. She must be ugly.

What was once a life of transcendent signs and sparkling miracles comes crashing down to earth. She observes, "Plaster rained down on us . . . the dust landed on our sweaty skin just like God glitter." In fighting to free her mother, Lacey May fights to free herself.

Godshot is a quest through motherlessness, sexual abuse, and spiritual manipulation. Under the extreme landscape of Peaches, Bieker manages to unfold stomach-turning truths with respectful grace and even dark humor. With each chapter, it's as if Bieker spits into the dust, kneads it into mud, and scrapes the scales from Lacey May's eyes with the deft love of a mother.

We arrive together on the other side with staggering clarity: God is bigger than our understanding. Ultimately, the story is as satisfying as a long summer rain under a desert sun.