

A Vermont family faces crisis struggling with poverty and cancer

"Soon The Light Will Be Perfect"

by Dave Patterson

Hanover Square Press, 2019

It's 1991, the summer of the Gulf War. The book's 12-year-old un-named narrator sits in a Vermont woods, smoking forbidden cigarettes and trying to figure out how the just God in whom his family believes could possibly have planned the suffering he has witnessed during the past months. His father, who has supported the family by working at the local munitions factory, has been fired. His strong, compassionate mother, the mainstay of the family, is suffering from cancer and horrific side-effects of chemotherapy and radiation treatment. His 15-

year-old brother, to whom he has hitherto been close, has grown away from him. His prayer that the family's suffering be transferred to somebody else has been answered with a terrible vengeance. In despair, he feels "a crack spread over the marble foundation of [his] childhood." Because of the boy's point of view and his doubts of the ultra-conservative Catholicism in which he has been raised, this excellent, almost certainly autobiographical book is marketed as a coming-of-age novel. It is also, however, a child's

portrait of a working-class Vermont family in unendurable stress, with parents clinging to certainties suddenly uncertain, and two boys alternately experimenting with freedom and feeling that their sins are responsible for their family's ills.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

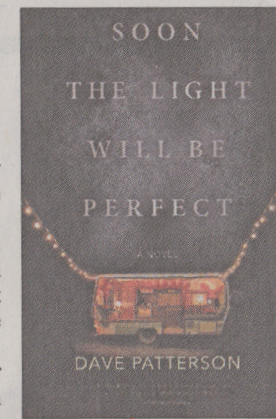
J.C. Myers. The narrator's family is getting by; in the last year, they have actually been able to move out of the

town's trailer park to a modest house. The move is crucial to the boys' social life; in school, the kids from houses don't associate with trailer park kids, even in the Gifted Program. The narrator and his brother have worked hard for a whole school year to be accepted, and one of their chief fears is that their mother's cancer and their father's unemployment will force the family to move back to the trailer park.

Ironically, the narrator participates in the snobbism that has hurt him: when his mother takes a lasagna to a destitute family, he is upset by being told to play with the family's son, "one of the free lunch kids even the trailer park kids avoid." The kid is fiercely resentful – but so is the boy who lives at the end of the narrator's "respectable" block in a house whose siding has been replaced by wrap.

Another kid in this floating bottom is Taylor, a girl of 13 who becomes friends with the narrator. Sexually abused by her mother's boyfriends since her father's death from cancer, she is as desperate for the remaining stabilities of his family as he is fascinated with her. His parents warn him away from these damaged kids, but with Mom barely functioning and Dad able to find work only in Tennessee, the boys are left to learn from experience.

The family's Catholicism ranges from parental insistence on Christian radio stations and Christian bookstore reading, through protests against abortion at Planned Parenthood, to attempts to cure Mom's cancer with holy water from the Jordan River and a group laying on of hands; its subtle description forms a backdrop



that accentuates the boy's confusion. Tempering it, however, is Mom's non-dogmatic charity and love, which continues even while she suffers the tortures of disease. The book, amid its searing portrayal of the narrator's unprotected struggles with his world, is a compellingly written study of

a family held together by feminine strength and masculine decency even as it encounters forces it couldn't possibly have anticipated.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels, "Return in Kind" and "Liar from Vermont," are both set on Boyd Hill Road.