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Hugh Welch has cared for his little sister Dorsey ever since they were children, when Dorsey looked at him as though he were a god. But when Dorsey returns to their small Michigan hometown with a successful career as an astrophysicist and a happy family life, Hugh, who has a long habit of worrying about his sister, realizes that it's his own life he has to cure, not Dorsey's. As they explore their complicated history over one hot Fourth of July weekend, they'll come to terms with the experiences that put such distance between them and discover the imperfect love that ties them as siblings."

First Light Details

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From Reader Review First Light for online ebook

Shannon says

I've read other novels by Charles Baxter and they were fantastic. However, though this story is not terrible, it can be a bit monotonous when reading about Dorsey and her affair with Carlo Pavorese. His rantings are so drawn out that halfway through reading, I was skeptical about my patience in finishing the book. I struggled through and I am glad I did, because the end is far better than the middle. I would not recommend this novel, but would very much refer readers to his other works, such as Feast of Love and Shadow Play.

spoko says

An interesting novel. I decided to read it based on a recommendation from someone in an online book group. They said it was remarkably well written, especially in how he developed his characters. It was pretty good in that sense, but throughout most of the book I found the characters to be less than believable.

They didn't mention the novel's central device, though, which is that it's written in reverse. It begins at the death of the main character (Hugh), and moves backwards in time, chapter by chapter, until he is a toddler at the birth of his sister (Dorsey). This is tied pretty closely with the Big Bang/Big Crunch theory of the universe (Dorsey is an astrophysicist), and in that sense it works quite well. That, actually, became the most interesting aspect of the novel for me.

As I said, the characters themselves were often not that believable. But there was something compelling about them. Their relationships were interesting at times, and it was interesting to speculate on what would "happen next"—that is, on what had happened to bring them to this point. But I have such a bad memory that I ended up forgetting details I wanted to remember, which would probably have made it a much more interesting book for me.

Joannie says

I read this book because it was one of Jodi Picoult's favorites. (I saw this in the a Sunday Parade newspaper). My initial thought is that it was just an ok read. When I give it a bit more thought I can see how a first born child can be affected by being the older sibling and feel it is their duty to always look out for their younger sibling. I as the first born was never made to feel this way.

Pam says

Came to this novel because it was on Jodi Picoult's reading recommendations and I'm always interested in books that another author recommends. The main big deal about this book is that it is written in reverse and that made me curious.

This was the author's first novel; prior to this he was known for his short stories and each one of the chapters in this book could really be a short story in itself. The first chapter is actually the end - it is the present day

when the brother (Hugh) and sister (Dorsey) have a reunion on the fourth of July after about 10 years of not seeing each other. Each chapter then goes back in time until we get to when Dorsey was born and Hugh was about 7 years old. It is about a brother who is handsome and popular but not overly intelligent who was charged by his parents to always take care of his very smart sister who doesn't seem to make friends very easily. At one point her father says to her- "You know I was smart too. It's not enough to be smart. You have to be tough. An upstart. You have to learn how to wait. Sooner or later the odds change so that they're in your favor... The good news is that the rest of your life isn't going to be like high school." She didn't believe him; she thought the rest of her life would be like high school. There is sweetness in Hugh wanting to keep her safe in the later chapters but the first chapter reads as if no one really likes anyone else very much. I liked the book the more I went into the past. An interesting and original read.

Janet says

First of all, I bought this book over twenty years ago-used. I guess I was interested because Charles Baxter was born and lives in Minnesota as do I. In Fact the description of Five Oaks, Michigan sounds a lot like my home town (25 years ago that is) of Excelsior, MN. He borrows street and store names and this kept me going - especially since I started the book on July fourth weekend and that is where the book starts too. After that Baxter almost lost me - with the literary device of going backwards in time with each chapter starting at a point before the last one had ended. It took a while to get used to but eventually I got into the flow.

The characters are well developed and very likable.

Stephen Phillips says

Everything on earth is what it is and something else. Everything gives off a signal. Most people never hear any of it. Their ears are closed. You have to listen with your whole body, everything in your soul...and to everyone you know, and all objects, everywhere. You can break your soul trying to hear.

I was struck by this quote near the end of Charles Baxter's first novel, *First Light*. In the scene, one of the protagonists, Hugh, is offered advice by his father after accusing him of being distant and aloof, always day-dreaming and not being near enough to him as a son. It concludes with his father claiming that Hugh's mother and sister (Dorsey) are good at "hearing" the world as he described, but not necessarily Hugh himself. It is a poignant moment in a novel filled with "signals" of past and present, specifically how one sibling relates to another from childhood to adulthood.

Baxter is adept at taking his readers on journeys of pained reality, his characters known for being at times jarringly human. With this novel, he tells the story in reverse, starting with Hugh and Dorsey and their families spending a July 4th weekend together and then moving backwards to their childhood years in Five Oaks, Michigan. To me, what really made the novel work was in fact this narrative device combined with his ability to show the burdens that both Hugh and Dorsey are trying to work through, not always succeeding but nevertheless facing them over time until we find them at a young age. Gradually, we see why Hugh thinks much less of himself than he should and how Dorsey lets her work stunt her emotions and quest for relational happiness; we also, eventually, see how these struggles combine and gain momentum the further back Baxter

takes them. The result is quite stirring, again partly because of the plodding movement into the past and of course for what is actually revealed through this "tunnel of memory."

It's easy to appreciate Charles Baxter. He writes with the brevity of a short story writer no matter which type of fiction he's engaged in. I know I (and others) have used Chekhov when speaking of him, perhaps because of his compassionate intelligence, never wordy but always full of human wisdom. If you are looking for a novel to slowly get lost in, I highly recommend you take your time with this one and enjoy it for the gem that it is.

Gail says

Another beautifully written novel by Charles Baxter. His gift is in exploring relationships without sugar coating. I really enjoyed the format he chose to tell the story, moving backward in time instead of forward, giving us the back story on his characters.

Sydney says

The first chapter of this book introduces you to a brother and a sister in their forties who are celebrating the Fourth of July together, along with their families. There is some tension between the siblings, but they also obviously have a lot of affection for each other. The secret of that tension and affection is revealed in chapters that unfold in reverse chronological order. So, the second chapter is about the sister and brother just days before they meet for the Fourth of July. It follows the same reverse sequence until you meet them as young adults, teenagers, and children. I loved the simple story about their relationship, and the reverse chronological order worked beautifully.

Erika says

I originally read this book in my 20s and it had a huge impact on me. It was the first time I deeply related to a literary novel without someone saying, "What is the symbol of the red hat? This will be on the test."

In *First Light* I saw—without it being explained—the ways a small detail could stand in for what a character was feeling. The novel showed me how objects could gather more and more meaning as various characters see them in different times until the physical world becomes a kind of code. It's a concept that's also used really well in *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, another of my favorites.

Anyway, I was nervous to pick up *First Light* again. It blazed so bright in my memory, and I didn't want to discover that it's just an example of how our young selves sometimes have no taste. But I loved it.

This is the story of Hugh and Dorsey, siblings from a small Michigan town. Dorsey is a brilliant astrophysicist living in California, while Hugh remained in the family home and sells Buicks, the only job he's ever had. The novel starts when they're in their 30s. Dorsey has brought her family for a visit, and we

understand that something is wrong, but don't know what.

Hugh stares out through the window...“All I ever wanted,” he says, suddenly afraid of his own generalization, “was to make sure...that you were all right. You know: safe.”

“That’s sweet,” she says. “But it won’t ever work. Not for me. It hasn’t ever worked. Besides, there’s no safety in safety. ... You and I Hugh—we’ve been divorced, haven’t we? Can brothers and sisters get divorces from each other? I think they can, and I think we got one.” She gives her brother a kiss on the cheek, then goes upstairs.

The next chapter takes place a few days earlier, and the following chapter is four months before that, until we realize this novel is told in reverse chronology. The final, heartbreaking, pages give us Hugh at five years old seeing his newborn sister for the first time.

This is a quiet novel about what drives us to make the choices we do. It also looks at the vast distance between our inner selves and what other people understand about us. Here’s a fantastic quote from toward the end of the book that showcases much of what Baxter is trying to say. Hugh is in high school.

His father looks Hugh in the eyes. “Listen to me,” he says. “Everything on earth is what it is and something else. Everything gives off a signal. Most people never hear any of it. Their ears are closed. You have to listen with your whole body, everything in your soul, to even this old, ugly drop-forged hammer”—he holds it up—“and to this wood. And everyone you know. And all objects, everywhere. You can break your soul, trying to hear. But some people have a talent. Your mother does. She’s better at hearing the world than I am. It’s like music, but it isn’t music, it’s an overtone. Dorsey hears it. It’s an order. Do you know what I mean?”

Hugh says he does, but he doesn’t and he’s angry again because his father has included everyone in the family in this lucky group of listeners except his own son, Hugh himself, dull, reliable, strong, and deaf.”

I loved this novel as much at 52 as I did at 24. It’s subtle and slippery and glowing with a sadness that indescribably beautiful.

David LeGault says

I finished this book at 11 o'clock at night, and as a result I couldn't sleep without medication.

I mean this as an ultimate compliment, this book stuck with me in a way I haven't experienced in years. The narrative continually works backward, which shifts the focus of the book away from the plot (we know how it ends) to the characters. Beautiful story.

Do yourself a favor and read this book.

Jeff says

Dorsy, her son Noah, and her husband Simon (who doesn't like to use maps) are driving from Buffalo, New York to visit Dorsy's brother Hugh, who lives with his family in their parent's old house in Five Oaks, Michigan. Dorsy moved to California and became a successful astrophysicist while Hugh remained in the same town his whole life and became a car salesman.

Charles Baxter goes back in time with each chapter of this novel to show how very different the lives of siblings Hugh and Dorsy can be...from their reunion on the Fourth of July to pick up fireworks from a woman who has known them since they were children, all the way back to when Hugh's father tells him that he has a sister now and that he will have to love and take care of her.

Jessica says

I read this because Charles Baxter taught creative writing at the U of MN while I went there. I never actually took one of his classes, but his name was familiar to me.

He's a fantastic writer. First Light has so many vivid characters - no one's forgettable, and everyone seems real. The narrative structure of the book - reverse chronology - is a bit kitschy, but I appreciate that he didn't take the predictable route of alluding to and then revealing awful childhoods. Hugh and Dorsey actually had decent parents, although imperfect.

I loved Simon. And I loved Hugh's relationship with Noah. And Carlo's obsession with Oppenheimer.

The narrative structure was really loose - almost more like a collection of short stories than a novel. I liked that about it, though. I'm looking forward to reading the rest of Baxter's work, and regretting that I never took one of his classes.

Ingrid M. says

I was in a field practicum where our professor enjoyed incorporating literature with our lessons on psychopharmacology and therapy, but he never went over it. In the middle of the story, I doubted my patience in finishing it, but I read the entire book and really really tried to figure out its relevancy to our course. Unfortunately I never did. I tried to go into it with an open mind, I really did, but it was painstaking to get through. I found the narrative thread (done in reverse chronological order) to be slow and tedious. I didn't find anything particularly engaging about the characters, but the dynamics between were nicely developed. The relationship between siblings Dorsey and Hugh resonated with me since I've an older brother I'm quite close to myself. As for the character arc, it was forgettable at best, and I would hardly recommend this book to anyone. I do hear that Baxter's other books are well-written though. It may be worth exploring.

Flo says

Anything written by Charles Baxter is going to be good. His first novel "First Light" is certainly that telling the story of dull Hugh and his sister, brainy Dorsey. Hugh is a car salesman, Dorsey a physicist. Sibling love is the subject of this intelligent novel. We meet brother and sister in the first chapter, Hugh father of two and

his shadowy wife and Dorsey, her son Noah who is deaf and her obnoxious husband, Simon, a famous actor. The novel then does something...well, novel. Their simple, quiet, yet thought provoking story is told backwards. I wish he had elaborated more on the parents, on Hugh's wife, who is a total mystery. Still, backward to the moment of love works.

Jon says

A blurb about a different book by Charles Baxter reads, "Perfectly modulated, unerringly seen, and written in prose of transparent beauty..." That seems to me exactly right. I recently read a collection of interrelated short stories by the same author and was very impressed. This book (now almost 30 years old) shows the same delicacy and ability to imply much while saying little. It's written backwards, with each section occurring before the preceding one, and finishing in a series of short chapters gradually taking the two main characters back to the birth of the younger one. All the characters are vivid, with one in particular, an elderly Italian physicist who is either lonely and out-of-sync with the stupidity of the world around him, or downright evil, as, vaguely resembling Dracula, he manipulates people by shamelessly playing on their emotions. Baxter writes skillfully in free indirect discourse, semi-assuming the voice of whatever character is his principal subject. This ranges from the very complex and allusive, when he's dealing with a highly literate adult physicist, to the very simple, when he's dealing with the same character at age 10. Using this method he can bounce around between characters, letting you see them from each other's point of view, and providing a full but somewhat ambiguous picture of each. I will be reading much more by this author.
