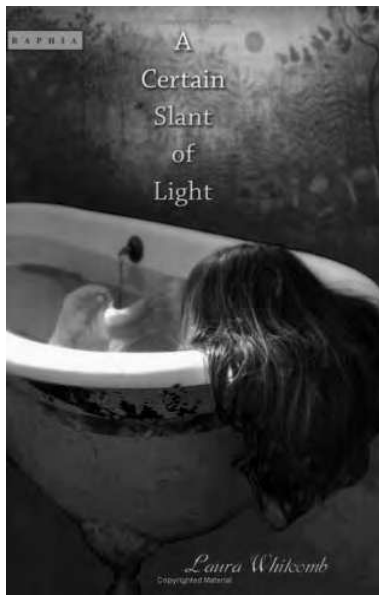


In the After-Death

A haunting love story

A CERTAIN SLANT OF LIGHT: fiction by Laura Whitcomb. 282 pages. Graphia Books, 2005. Paperback, \$8.99.

"Someone was looking at me," begins Laura Whitcomb's debut novel, "a disturbing sensation if you're dead." Though hardly the only deceased young woman to narrate a novel in recent years, Whitcomb's narrator, Helen, quickly leaves thoughts of *The Lovely Bones* in the dust. Helen has been dead for more than a century, spending her time cleaving to her hosts, at least one of which seems quite familiar (one clue is in the book's title). She doesn't exactly haunt people, but lingers in their space, trying in her disembodied way to affect their lives (and spending a lot of time reading over their shoulders). Leaving is not an option. Helen's most recent host, Mr. Brown, is a high school English teacher, and it's in his class that she finds a boy looking at her.



Of course, he's no ordinary boy. He's James Deardon, a spirit like Helen. But he's inhabiting the body of a young man who slipped away during a drug overdose. James and Helen are drawn to each other, feeling horribly, lonesomely like the only spirits of their type in the world (ghosts and creepy dark things are out there, but only given passing notice). It's just finding Helen a body to borrow — and then passing as its former owner — that presents a challenge.

Helen and James were both adults when they became Light (Helen's term for her state of being), but in the bodies of teenagers they act like teens, without thought for consequences until nearly too late. Readers can see disaster coming from some way down the path, but it's the creative, thoughtful way Whitcomb gets her lovestruck haunters to and through their difficulties that makes the book so deeply readable. Whitcomb's graceful prose is deceptively light, treading gently but perceptively through topics that

often trip up lesser writers. Her handling of the spiritual side of Helen and James' existence is deft and true — questions of love, loss, guilt, faith and what becomes of a spirit when the body dies are threaded throughout the lovers' existence. Answers, though, are harder to come by, and while Whitcomb seems to nudge her readers to consider the redemptive powers of story, forgiveness and love, her touch is so light you might hardly feel it at all. Just a slight breeze, a ripple in the air, like someone Light was there. **EW**

Laura Whitcomb speaks on "Confessions of a First-Time Novelist" at 6:30 pm April 6 at Baker Downtown Center. \$5-\$10 sug. don. for non-Willamette Writers members.

Whitcomb's graceful prose is deceptively light, treading gently but perceptively through topics that often trip up lesser writers.

BOOK NOTES: Tom Givon reads from *Context as Other Minds: The Pragmatics of Sociality, Cognition and Communication*, 3 pm 4/7, UO Bookstore ... Friends of Eugene Public Library book sale, 9 am-6 pm 4/8 and 9 am-4 pm 4/9, Lane County Fairgrounds Performance Hall ... **Maryl Barker** and her dog Gracie, authors of the *Gracie's Great Adventures* series, read and sign, 4:30 pm 4/9, The Healthy Pet. 302-6279 ... **Ralph Salisbury** reads from *War in the Genes*, 7 pm 4/11, Knight Library, UO ... **Tina Boscha** speaks on "*River in the Sea: A Novel*," noon 4/12, 330 Hendricks, UO ... Author and law professor **Richard Thompson Ford** speaks on *Racial Culture: A Critique*, with book signing to follow, 7:30 pm 4/11, 175 Knight Law, UO ... **Stephen Paul Miller** reads and signs *Skinny Eighth Avenue*, 4:30 pm 4/15, Books Without Borders ... Windfall Reading Series: "Grant Us Peace," readings by **Madroona Holden**, **Michael Hanner**, **Colette Jonopulos**, **Charles F. Thielman** and **Deb Casey**, with performance by the Eugene Concert Choir, 7 pm 4/18, Downtown Library ... Anne Lamott reads from *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 7:30 pm 4/18, First Unitarian Church, Portland ... **Patrick Carman** discusses and signs *The Tenth City*, 6:30 pm 4/19, Barnes & Noble ... **Bob Willard** speaks on *The Next Sustainability Wave*, 6:30 pm 4/19, 182 Lillis, UO.

STAR 102.3
Real Music Variety!