

A Keen Eye

Close observation in Abu-Jaber's new novel

ORIGIN, fiction by Diana Abu-Jaber. W.W. Norton, 2007. Hardcover, \$24.95.

When I think of Diana Abu-Jaber, I think of food and warmth — the result of falling into her second novel, *Crescent*, which was Eugene's 2006 Readin' in the Rain selection. The story of Sirine, a Los Angeles chef, *Crescent* explored the intersection of love, food and identity; it was dense with description, with the sights and smells of Sirine's kitchen and her life.

Origin, Abu-Jaber's new novel, is likewise dense with detail — but of a very different kind. Set in cold, snowy Syracuse, *Origin* is the story of Lena Dawson, a fingerprint analyst in a forensics lab. Lena is a presence hard to pin down: uncannily observant, quiet, contained, uncertain but sleek, solitary yet warm. In the past, Lena has been called on more for her intuition and exquisite attention to detail than for the more mundane parts of her work, and it is this past reputation that brings Erin Cogan to Lena's office. Erin is bereft: Her baby son just died, a death determined to be SIDS — but Erin doesn't believe the story is as simple as that.

Investigating the cut-short childhood of Erin's son — and then of other babies who die similarly, leading the police to question whether these are accidents or something else — returns Lena to her own

childhood, a subject of uncertainty and doubt. Raised by foster parents who never officially adopted her, Lena has strange memories of a childhood in a rain forest and an ape mother who protected her. Her foster mother, Pia, won't tell her anything, but the need to know nags at Lena as memories surface and drift. An image glimpsed on a baby monitor's camera brings that past closer to the present, and Lena's story gets inextricably tangled up with the investigation she can't let go of.

But *Origin* isn't simply a crime story, just as *Crescent* wasn't only about food. Lena is a fascinating narrator, her eye constantly falling on the way a woman touches her hair, her nose noting unusual scents and the metallic tang of things that shouldn't be in a nursery. She has a former husband, Charlie, from whom she's separated but not divorced, and with the uncanny eye of the former love, Charlie pinpoints her new admirer before Lena has even thought about Keller, a police detective. Where Charlie told Lena what she should do to act more like other people, Keller asks how he can help but doesn't question Lena's instincts.

Origin is a haunting story, icy cold in its upstate New York setting but glowing with the unusual brightness of its heroine. This is no hard-nosed crime scene investigator but a quiet woman with an unusual



talent for reading a scene, a face, a footprint. What propels Lena's story is the delicate, balanced, engrossing way Abu-Jaber perfectly intertwines Lena's personal story with that of the case she's investigating and sets both threads in a Syracuse so

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vivid you envision it without even trying. What Lena is really exploring is herself: her mysterious history, her reluctance to connect, her willingness to live quietly, holding herself separate and still on the outside while inside memory tangles and swirls. To dive into her story is to find yourself part of her world, rapt, even tense, as the answers come to light. **EW**

Diana Abu-Jaber reads from and discusses Origin at 6:30 pm on Thursday, July 12 at the Downtown Library.

BOOK NOTES: Pia Z. Ehrhardt reads from *Famous Fathers and Other Stories* and Michelle Wildgen reads from *You're Not You*, 7:30 pm 7/9, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. Robin Romm reads from *The Mother Garden: Stories*, 7 pm 7/14, Barnes & Noble. Josh Ticknell reads from *Biodiesel America*, 2 pm 7/15, Powell's Technical Books, Portland. Emma Bull reads from *Territory* and Will Shetterly reads from *The Gospel of the Knife*, 7 pm 7/18, Powell's, Beaverton. Alan Weisman reads from *The World Without Us*, 7:30 pm 7/19, Powell's on Burnside, Portland.

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