



## THE STARGAZER'S EMBASSY Eleanor Lerman

Mayapple Press pb, 306pp, \$18.95

**Barbara Melville**

Julia Glazer seems ordinary enough. A traditional yet independent young woman, she keeps herself to herself, cleaning apartments for a living and drowning out the noise of the world with music. This is the reality she thinks she wants, a simple life where she can move around unseen, where the past stays buried. And it works, for a while.

But someone or something is watching: the “grays”, or the “things”, aliens that seem to follow her at night, getting closer and harder to ignore. Then there are abductees who hold the answers to her mysterious past, those who threaten to understand the odd star pattern tattooed on her wrist, no longer hidden by her sleeve or easy to forget. Memories of her late, alien-obsessed mother rise to the surface, creating fertile ground for Julia’s fears to grow. Slowly but surely, realism and science fiction unite, momentum builds and an incredible story unfolds.

Set in New York City in the 1990s, part one explores Julia’s

romantic life with John, a professor of psychiatry. From the get go, their relationship moves back and forth between gently stable and heartbreakingly impossible.

Julia craves the security, love and connection that come with a normal life but she doesn’t want to be known, and she certainly doesn’t want the penetrating analysis that comes with John’s work. As the story progresses, John’s fascination with alien abduction manifests and strengthens. The normal life, or the mere semblance of it Julia desperately wants to protect, becomes more and more threatened by frightening truths that invade her past and present.

Themes of escape, loss and connection are woven skillfully with a strong plot. Its events are informed by a number of real-life reports of alien experiences, bringing rigor and authenticity. Every moment or conversation is there for a reason, echoing the story’s themes and foreshadowing paths it could take without giving too much away. Julia’s narration is soulful, self aware and almost certainly unreliable. Her prose combines with strong world building to create atmosphere and suspense, and the whole first half is bathed in an unearthly 90s nostalgia.

“Each little town was an island surrounded by farms in the valleys and gorges fed by winter rivers; there was no place to go on foot, miles to travel to get anywhere, even by car. [...] I felt the apprehension of someone peeking around a corner and fearful of what they might find.”

This quote echoes the feel of the whole book: a road trip, alone, in the dark, and without a map. And as horrifying as that sounds, it’s a journey I’d recommend. The modern world floods in later in part two and is still full of

unsettling anticipation. But being a teenager in the 1990s, this first part, particularly the opening chapters, spoke to me more.

While it’s hard to fault this book, there was a point where I thought I was going to hate it. In the earlier chapters, Julia occasionally narrates lines such as “I was attractive enough, I suppose, even in my cleaning lady disguise of old jeans and a thrift store shirt”. I know a lot of readers wouldn’t think anything of this and if you’re one of them, feel free to abandon the rest of this paragraph. Personally, I don’t think people talk/think like that, not even characters. It leaves me with the image of an author pushing words around, trying to show a character’s appearance within the clunking mechanics of an internal monologue. While not entirely lazy (I’ve seen much, much worse), it’s still jarring to see the artifice laid bare given the rest of the prose is so strong.

It’s hard to say what the main strength is, but if I had to choose, I’d go with originality. If you’d asked me a year ago, I’d have told you the world doesn’t need another alien abduction tale. But here the aliens appear as much the confused and frightened victims as their human counterparts. The clichés of the genre are nodded to but not part of the landscape. Make no mistake, this book isn’t above other interpretations of alien abduction, it’s just different. It’s about finding yourself operating outside the rules when all you want is to fit in. To crave human connection, to reconcile loss, to explore a difficult past, and embrace an always uncertain future.

I believe it comes down to the reversal of a universal science fiction theme: this story isn’t about what it means to be human but what it means *not* to be. And that is an idea worth exploring.