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FUGITIVE BLUE

By Dani Shapiro

Doubleday/Nan A. Talese. 256 pp. (galley has 247pp.) \$20.

At 32, Joanna Hirsch, the narrator of Dani Shapiro's second novel, defines her life in terms of abandonment. When she was 12, Joanna's world-famous artist mother, Georgia, who believes "there's a very fine line between marriage and mourning," left their suburban home for a SoHo loft. The same day, Joanna met neighbor and eventual step-brother Billy Overmeyer, the only person with whom she would ever feel both safe and desired. Years later, when she and Billy attend Yale where Joanna studies drama, she will meet director Nigel Easden, who becomes her lover for 13 years.

In rapid succession, Billy becomes the tragic victim of urban violence, Nigel leaves when Joanna receives raves in a review that pans him, and Georgia retreats to Italy.

Shapiro's prose is so graceful that her erratic shifting from past to present tense never jars. But she lets Joanna languish in a melodramatic self-pity verging on bathos. With its puerile conviction that "pain is an integral part of feeling alive," Joanna's becomes an ironic viewpoint: egocentric while more interesting and pitiable characters emerge around her. Nigel arouses only contempt, but Billy and especially Georgia grow fascinating. Billy, gallant by nature but confused about his sexuality, remains conflictingly obsessed by and distanced from Joanna. Georgia, we learn, witnessed in 1941 her Lithuanian father's murder by Nazis. Both her mistrust of family attachment and her passionate dedication to creating visual beauty stem from that childhood trauma. Through her, Shapiro suggests what can be forged from loss. Also through her, we see how attuned this young author is to the creative temperament.