HEAVEN, INDIANA

Jan Maher

PRAISE FOR *HEAVEN, INDIANA*

"Buried secrets churn beneath the placid surface of a small town in this tragicomic debut novel...A bit like a darker-tinged version of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon narrative, Maher's fictive universe unfolds with richly humorous details and expansive meaning. A funny, poignant tale of an imperfect paradise."

— *Kirkus Reviews, named to Kirkus Reviews Best Books of 2018*

"A lush, multilayered portrait of the cycle of life, the interconnectedness of human experience, and the sometimes painful but always necessary struggle of each individual to search for a sacred niche that can legitimately be called "home." This is a remarkable piece of writing.

— *Arthur C. Jones, author, Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*

The book reads like the town's best gossip bending your ear, with all the juicy details and half-truths that make gossip so compelling….Remarkably, Maher is able to maintain a convincing consistency of character through decades of life changes, both subtle and dramatic. This book is over much too quickly.

— *Viviann Kuehl, The Midwest Book Review*

This is a wonderful, wonderful novel. The unadorned but lyrical language sets the mood and tone of the place and its people perfectly; and, like the quirky, multi-dimensional characters who inhabit Heaven, conceals and reveals an extraordinary inner richness and deeply-textured story.

— *Taryn Kincaid, author, If You Can't Stand the Heat*

It has been a long, long time since I have read a novel that left me feeling so filled and yet so emptied at the end. Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* comes the closest. In *Heaven, Indiana*, Jan Maher describes life in a small, perhaps failing Midwestern town that in a sense, sits on the edge of eternity. In a place where everyone knows everyone else's business, secrets flourish and permeate the fabric of the town's life. Ms. Maher tells her story not only with economy but with such extraordinary clarity, sensitivity and understanding of, and compassion for, human nature, it took my breath away. *Heaven, Indiana* is heaven.

— *Laura Palkovic, author, Some Several Souls*

I love this book--the control of tone, the ingenuity of plot, the delicious prose! As an English prof I'm a persnickety reader, so you can imagine, when I say that it's on my short list of books to cherish, how many it beat out. Can't wait to get my hands on the sequel and see these people again. The startling end of this novel promises developments beyond our conceiving, though not beyond Maher's. Not much is beyond hers. She's a great pleasure and a happy discovery.

— *Ann B. Tracy, author, Leviathan Rising*

For all the Miller Girls

1954

Elephants paced restlessly, their immense feet beating slow syncopations. Monkeys gossiped nervously of fearsome and forbidden places. Chameleons flicked their quick tongues and tasted the August air. An unblinking boa curled around the single rock that graced its cage; the tiger mother bared her teeth and readied her claws.

Out on Millstone Road, up in Lester and Helen Breck's barn, daughter Melinda howled in surprise, then roared in rage. Pain had taken her past exhaustion to a point of pure compelling necessity. Angry at the wrenching labor, this betrayal by nature, she took a great gulp of air and finally expelled her squalling daughter. Rough hands guided the infant upwards to her mother's belly, placed her at the breast. The anonymous babe turned her lips, seeking the nipple, and laid claim to her first meal.

Around the corner and down the road, the Wild Animal Caravan of the Hoosier Midways Carnival, mysteriously persuaded that the worst of some invisible storm was now over, finally settled down to sleep at the Heaven, Indiana 4-H and Fair Grounds.

There was a distracted air about this new mother. She was the farmer's daughter immortalized in bad jokes about traveling salesman. Her own bad joke had passed through a little over eight months earlier, leaving samples all over central Indiana.

One grew in the belly of Melinda—not a particularly bright girl, but a pleasant and obedient one. She'd been instructed by her father to make up the extra bed for the Fuller Brush man. "I'd like the gentleman to feel at home," he'd said.

The peddler knew an opportunity when he saw one. "You know what would make me feel most at home?" he asked the innocent Melinda. "I've got a pretty little wife there, and she keeps me warm at night. If you really want to make me feel at home, you could come back later, after your folks is asleep, and cuddle up here with me for a bit, so's I'm not so lonesome."

Melinda enjoyed this seduction. It was different, doing it in a bed. The brush man was a far more accomplished lover than Cedric Burney, her classmate across the border of the back forty. She didn't think to consider what might happen next.

By the time Melinda's surprised roar pushed her infant into the Midwest world, she'd been sequestered for fully four months—kept in the barn by her mother, who told friends and neighbors that Melinda had gone to Iowa to help an ailing great aunt. Seventeen weeks in the barn had changed the farmer's daughter. She'd grown more and more to trust the ways of cows and pigs, less and less to expect anything of mothers.

It was her father who attended the birth.

Helen Breck did come out to take a look at the newborn, and found her worst fears confirmed. So when Lester came to tell her that Melinda had developed a fierce fever in the predawn hours of her second day postpartum, Helen did what had to be done. A woman no longer given to tears, having long ago learned that they got her nothing but more grief, she was determined not to cry. She wrapped the infant in a clean piece of flannel, put it in a picnic basket and put the basket in the Kaiser. "Bring Melinda in the house," she told Lester, "and give her as much hot chamomile tea as she can take. I'll be back in a bit." And she drove off to town.

Lester was afraid to ask his wife where she was intending to go. These past many months, he'd felt unable to ask her about anything she was planning, had preferred instead to wait and see. The tortured determination on Helen's face the day she sent Melinda to the barn had chilled him, made him suddenly fearful of something he couldn't name. The keen intelligence and wry wit he loved in her had given way to humorless hypervigilance. Now she carried herself coiled, ready to spring, and it kept him in a state of constant, unfamiliar anxiety.

He protested at first. "Don't you think she'd be better off in one of those homes, Mother?"

But Helen would hear none of it. "How will she take care of herself? No stranger is going to look after her as well as we can."

"Couldn't she just stay in the house, then?"

"Now how long do you think it would be till the whole town knew? She has enough trouble with people taking advantage without these young fellows around here getting the idea they can have their way with her."

Lester had to admit that she had a point. Helen had always been fiercely protective of Melinda, and Melinda was pretty dependent on them. This did seem to be a way to manage the situation without getting all of Heaven in an uproar over it.

So instead of arguing further with Helen's decision, he'd done his best to make the girl comfortable in her exile. He set up the rollaway bed for her, built a little table and bench, brought out an extension cord to run off the light in the chicken coop so she could see after the sun went down, hauled up the old platform rocker so he could sit sometimes and keep her company. He brought her books to look at, quilt patches to work on, and a Ball jar full of fireflies with holes poked in the lid—hoping it would amuse her as much as it had years before, when she had tried to read by their light.

They didn't talk much about her situation. She never

questioned the appropriateness of her punishment. There had been rumors at school the year before about Gloria Montgomery, a girl over in Montpelier, who graduated from high school and went off to social work school in June. Everyone seemed to know that girls didn't go to college and even if they did, no one went in June. It was pretty clear that Gloria had made a big mistake, was "p-g," would be gone for a few months, and would reappear later, slimmer, without a whit more education. Perhaps, Melinda reasoned, Gloria had been sent to a barn, too.

Melinda and her father sat quietly most of the time, or Lester read a bit from the Bible or from Volume D-E-F of the Wonderbook Encyclopedia, which Melinda had bought some years back at an estate sale.

As close as they got to be, though, it embarrassed Lester to be the one she hollered for when her water broke. He had to keep reminding himself that he'd delivered dozens of calves, and this was surely no different.

At the midway, there was still a hint of dew on the grass, and everyone was sleeping in. The night had been still and hot; sleep hadn't even been an option till well after midnight. Helen took care that no one saw her stop near the tent of Madame Gajikanes, the Gypsy fortune-teller, nor saw her place the basket at the door. Then she got back into the Kaiser and drove on.

She made a stop at Clara's Kitchen, parking up the street so her footpath to Clara's would take her by early-riser Ida Mueller's yard. There, Helen stopped to compliment Ida on her beautiful flowerbeds, and stayed to chat a full fifteen minutes about the winning lima beans at the centennial fair. "Fordhooks," Ida said in summary, "are always the best bet."

"That's a fact," Helen agreed. "You can always count on Fordhooks."

At Clara's, she discussed the new elementary school principal

with June Wade, who took her order for black coffee and white toast. June had heard he was a young fellow, not much more than thirty. "He'll have his hands full with all those Bickle children running around the hallway," Helen opined.

After breakfast, she strolled up the street to Herman's Market and picked up a loaf of Korn Krust bread. On the way back to the car, she waved through the window of Charlene's Beauty Shop to Minnie, helmeted in the dryer, first customer of the day.

At home again, she checked on Melinda, who was inside now, tossing in her sleep. She sponged the girl's forehead, and cleared away the teacup. Then she went out to the barn, to make sure there were no obvious signs of its having been used as an inn. Lester had put the bed away, moved the rocker back to the porch and brought the books and sewing projects inside. Helen dismantled the extension-cord lighting system and liberated what were left of the lightning bugs. Next, she went to the summer kitchen, where a peck of Kentucky Wonders Lester had picked that morning waited. He had already fired up the old woodstove and started water heating in the canner. She slid the pot aside, lifted the burner, and looked once over her shoulder to make sure he wasn't around to watch. Then she pulled an old photograph from her apron pocket and tossed it onto the bed of burning coals. She watched till flames crawled completely across the image before replacing the burner. Only then did she allow two or three tears to surface before drying her eyes on her apron hem and turning her attention to stringing the beans.

The next day at church she bubbled with news. "Melinda called from the bus station in Marion late last night, back from Sioux City. When we picked her up, she was so tuckered out from traveling that she went right to sleep in the car, hardly even woke up to go to bed, and was still sleeping when we got up for church this morning. Well, we decided to let her just rest up a bit." She dropped her voice and confided, as if telling secrets of

state. "You know, it's a two-day trip on the Greyhound. The poor thing is just exhausted."

"Your Aunt Doris is feeling better, then?"

"Oh, yes," Helen said. "Melinda says she's fit as a fiddle now."

"It's a blessing to have family to help you out when you need it."

"Yes, it sure is."

There's a particular kind of haze that hangs over an Indiana town on a hot August day. It isn't really bright golden, at least not in Heaven. It's almost white.

The fortune-teller slept in her tent that Friday night. Something she rarely did, but there was more air there than in the trailer, and the August heat was so still and pressing that those with any options to do so bedded down where there was at least hope of a bit of breeze.

John and Maggie Quinn Fletcher fled with their chubby, but not yet giant infant to the riverside, where they sat far enough apart to let any wayward breeze circulate freely between them. The baby, a girl, was colicky. Maggie let her suck a finger dipped in whiskey before handing the pint bottle to her husband. Then she raised her skirt over her immense knees and fanned herself with it. John settled his bulk on the bank of the river and sipped the whiskey. Between them, they weighed well over half a ton, and August heat was one of their greatest occupational discomforts, if not outright hazards. The baby was, as yet, in the normal weight range, but it, too, was suffering from the heat.

The less kind among their audiences declared it a miracle that John and Maggie were ever able to get near enough to each other to accomplish pregnancy in the first place. But somehow they had, though Maggie had been unaware of her condition until the night of the Memorial Day parade. She had eaten heavily that evening, her value to the carnival dependent on her ability to top the scales at more than five hundred pounds. An illness

earlier that spring had caused her weight to dip precipitously to four hundred eighty-one, and she needed to gain back the lost twenty pounds. Her part of the sideshow involved stepping onto elephant scales for a weigh-in. The scales had initially been altered to keep her above five hundred, but a rare inspection from Weights and Measures that day had required Mr. Coleson, the carnival manager, to correct the "error."

The night of the parade, Maggie thought she had heartburn. When she began to have cramps, John sent for Granny, as everyone called Madame Gajikanes. Granny was known, in addition to her fortune-telling, for having a few tricks up her sleeve: old Gypsy cures, it was said. The carny people were generally willing to put much more trust in their own Granny than in any of the small-town doctors who practiced along the carnival routes.

Maggie's water broke just as Granny arrived, and it hadn't taken her psychic powers to note that Maggie's problem would be fully apparent in a moment and far more chronic than heartburn.

So when Granny awoke from the mugginess and stepped outside her tent that August morning to catch a breath of air, she thought at first that John and Maggie had left their daughter Lenore at the door. It took only a moment to realize, however, that the infant at her feet was entirely new, no more than a day or two old.

Granny didn't hesitate. She brought the basketed baby in. "And who are you?" she crooned to it, as she peeled back the bits of blanket and clothing to see if it was a boy or girl who had come visiting. "A little girl? That nobody wants? And nothing to your name. *Nada en todos. Rien de tout.* But that's all right. That's the best way to be. Nothing to hold you down, nothing to keep you back. Let me see your hand, little one." Gently, she pried the tiny fist open. "A strong heart line," she assured the infant. "That's good. You'll need it in this world. And you've got a good long

life coming, too." She touched the life line and the baby closed her fist again, holding tightly to Granny's finger. But what struck Granny most about this newcomer wasn't her life line. It was her eyes. They seemed to take in everything.

Madame Gajikanes laid her plans. Old Man Coleson wouldn't want to deal with another infant. He was already in an uproar about John and Maggie, although he grudgingly acknowledged that the child was indeed adding to the value of the sideshow. Not that children were forbidden or even discouraged. They were doted upon by most of the regulars. It's just that Coleson hated surprises and he abhorred scandals.

And Granny knew for a fact that an abandoned baby was somebody's scandal; especially one abandoned at a Gypsy's tent. No matter that Madame Gajikanes wasn't a real Gypsy. The myths were as pervasive as they were fallacious, and Old Man Coleson was obsessive about avoiding trouble. His was a Sunday-school carnival of the first degree. He wouldn't want any headlines about baby-stealing to sully his reputation.

She had, of course, no bottles with which to feed a baby. Maggie did, but Granny couldn't trust her to keep a confidence. Some who knew Maggie best said her mouth was the very biggest thing about her. There was Lillian, on the other hand, whose prize Bengal had just given birth. Granny went to Lillian and told her a child had arrived from heaven.

She left with two bottles and a three-day supply of baby tiger formula. She mixed the formula with one of her own that kept the infant safely quiet in the back room of her tent. Her customers on Saturday and Sunday never guessed that while their secrets were being discovered in the wrinkles of their palms, Granny kept one of her own just a few feet away. And when the photographer from the Heaven Historical Society took a human-interest photo of the town's new babies at the gate to the fairgrounds, with the centennial fair and Hoosier Midways

forming the backdrop, only two infants were featured: Eleanor Alice, born the tenth of June to Robert and Katherine Denson, and Sue Ellen Sue, born the fifth of January to Frederick and Elizabeth Tipton. The unnamed baby found the twenty-first of August by Nancy White (known to her clients as Madame Gajikanes) went entirely unremarked.

The sun came up Monday morning on a day that promised little relief from the heat. At the Breck farm, Melinda was too feverish to articulate her consternation. She was fairly sure she'd had a baby, but she couldn't seem to find it. Fitful sleep, strange dreams, flames, images of her skin like parchment paper catching fire at the edge, then wafting up in ghostly white ash. "Mother," Lester called out from Melinda's bedside, where he had relieved Helen of the watch at four o'clock, when it was time to feed the chickens and milk the cows. "I think she's taking a turn for the worse."

Helen Breck finally admitted she was out of her league. She called Dr. Brubecker then, and reached his nurse, who told her the doctor was on vacation for another four days. Relieved, she called his backup, who arrived from Hartford City just in time to watch Melinda draw her last breath. Helen professed astonishment when the doctor declared that Melinda appeared to have given birth very recently, and that under the circumstances he'd probably have to order an autopsy. She broke down and sobbed, beat her fists upon her stolid husband's chest and wondered aloud and copiously how Melinda could have done this to them; wondered, moreover, what could have happened to the baby. Even insisted that the Chicago Greyhound station be searched for what would be their first and only grandchild, their only hope of an heir.

Monday was strike day for the carnival. While the rest of the folks finished folding their tents and packing up their props,

Granny announced that she was off for a minute or two to coax her old '38 Chevy to the gas station, fill the tank. And it was as easy as that to slip out of Heaven, go off to find another carnival where no one would question the sudden appearance of a new granddaughter. Later, Lillian, thinking quickly, told a furious Coleson that Granny had gotten an urgent letter from her estranged daughter Peggy on Saturday, and after a long distance call on Sunday night, felt compelled to make the trip to Ohio, where her help was needed.

On her way out of town, Granny passed by Sheriff Johnson, headed out to the Breck farm to see what all the fuss up there was about.

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