BOOK REVIEW: *Daughters Unto Devils* By Amy Lukavics

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

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The first time I lay with the post boy was on a Sunday, and I broke three commandments to do it. *Honor thy father and thy mother, thou shalt not lie,* and *remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.* Why couldn’t I stop counting all of my sins? It was as if I was craving the wrath that was to follow them, *challenging* it, if only to make certain that I was, indeed, alive.

There used to be a time that I would have feared the consequences of acting out in such a way against the Lord, but not anymore, not after last winter, not after being trapped in the cabin for months and losing my mind and seeing the devil in the woods. Clearly, the Lord had forgotten all about me, and therefore I would no longer be following his rules.

“When I die, I will see Hell,” I whispered after we were through with our sins of the flesh, but the post boy did not hear me over the sound of the water from the creek. “The devil has claimed me already.”
“You're strange,” he said after the silence became uncomfortable. “What’s different about you?”

I was chilled at the question. Too many things, Henry, I thought. This is only the second time we’ve ever met. Still, the question awakened the memories of last winter unmercifully, the ones that were too painful to bear, the ones that ended up causing all sixteen years of my life to slip away from me like water through open fingers.

The screaming, oh, all that screaming, and the claws, and the bloody footprints in the snow, and the devil who knew my sins...
Verner? It would be a lie to claim that the question didn’t irritate me; I was here for good feelings in abundance and good feelings only.

I pulled my frown into a shy grin. “I think I’ve already answered that question for you, have I not?”

“Oh, yes.” He smiled, and kissed my fingertips. “I suppose that you have. The four-hour ride to get here was more than worth it, I would say. I hope you don’t think less of me, pursuing your body with such haste—”

“Oh of course not.” I cut him off with a kiss. “I know it is sinful, but it also feels...necessary. How can that be?”

And it was true. Already I found myself wanting to be with him again, my flame in the dark, my rescuer.

“I understand exactly what you mean.” Henry’s hand slid down my side, and I forgot all about the devil in the woods, as well as the secret that made him come for me in the first place. “I wonder how I went so long making deliveries to Crispin’s Peak, never suspecting that the lady of my dreams lived right on the other side of the mountain.”
After Henry's trousers were back on and he was riding away on his horse, General, toward the trail that would eventually lead back to the settlement, I walked home through the trees, pulling pine needles from my hair and securing the buttons at the neck of my dress with fumbling fingers. At the sight of the cabin I became overcome with a most indecent bloom of shame, the shame of sacrificing my body and liking it, \textit{really} liking it. Did it mean I had no conscience? Pa would have certainly thought so.

Ever since I could remember he'd ingrained in us the knowledge that to betray our Lord was to betray ourselves, our \textit{souls}. A woman's body was to be for her husband only, and anything less would result in the Lord's profound disappointment and, by extension, the dismissal of the daughter from the family. I wondered if Pa would really cast me out if he discovered what I had just done with Henry. Part of me believed he would, but it was hard to say.

She doesn't even know that he exists and I've lain naked with him in the woods not once, not twice, but eight times now. And it's because of this that I think I must have truly lost my mind, because after witnessing the birth of my youngest sister, Hannah, I wouldn't wish pregnancy or child birth on even my worst enemy.
On more occasions than I care to admit, my mind creeps to a dark, spider-webbed place where my new baby sister is the reason I’ve turned into such a soulless liar.

Because sometimes in the blackest depths of the night, I pray for something bad to happen to Hannah. Sickness maybe, or a quick accident during her bath. The horrible thoughts pain me, cause me to sob quietly into my pillow, but I become temporarily numbed from the evil as I think about my ma and how much she has changed since the winter and the sickness and the birth.

The woman who wove grass halos for Emily and me when we were children is long gone, a slave to the unconditional love she has for her poor, helpless baby, born deaf and blind and full of confused rage as a result of it all. Ma’s worry for Hannah never ceases, never slows, constantly showing itself through dark circles under her eyes and a newly formed hunch in her stature that wasn’t there before last winter.

(Could it be I who is responsible for those circles? I who have pulled her shoulders down with the weight of the entire world? I cannot bear the thought, no, it
Surely if the baby hadn’t survived the birth, things wouldn’t be as dire as they are now, as positively changed. So I bring myself to pray for Hannah’s death, beg really, and am afterward reduced to a shriveling shell of a girl with no soul and a craving for the odd post boy who likes having his parts tugged.

Of course, after the tears dry up and I’m left hiccupping in bed, I realize that what I’m doing is despicable and morbid and wrong. The Lord would hate me for wishing death upon one of his creations, but by now I am quite certain that the Lord hates me anyway.

Sinner. My wish for Hannah is my darkest secret, the one that called the devil upon me, the one that will be my undoing.

When I remember this the tears usually start again, this time rolling down a face that burns with regret and shame. Shame, the constant. Shame, the stain on my soul that can never be washed away.

I heard once that long-term isolation can have an effect most wicked on even the most competent of minds and seasoned mountain men, and also that guilt on its own is capable of ruin. By the time I met Henry the post boy in Crispin’s Peak while I was in for supplies with my pa, I’d experienced both, and my mind was eaten with rot.
I want to, more than anything, but I cannot. I can hardly even admit what I’ve done to myself, even though my bleeding cycle has been missed many times, and my breasts ache like never before, and I feel horribly nauseous every single morning and sometimes late at night, just like Ma was when she first suspected she was with child with all of my siblings.

It shouldn’t have come to this, but there is no way to avoid it. Not after the secret get-togethers in the woods behind my family’s cabin, not after the hidden flowers and candies started showing up in the bushes by our meeting place, not after the kisses where Henry’s tongue was in my mouth and his hands were pressing my body against his, like if he didn’t have me soon he’d absolutely die.

Besides Emily, I also have the reactions of my parents to fear. Ma will weep, undoubtedly, too overcome with disappointment to function. Pa will call me a whore, he’ll call me a sinner, he’ll throw me out on my own as proof that my misgivings will not bring down his own faith. One bad apple could spoil the entire barrel. Un-sympathetic hearts, indeed.

I might as well be dead.
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I must take control of my fate. Tomorrow is the first of the new month, and Henry will surely show up for a secret visit. So tomorrow, I will tell Henry about the baby. If he really loves me, as he's claimed breathlessly over and again during our nude entanglements in the forest, he should be happy. Maybe even more encouraged to bring me home with him this time.

I dream about darkness and punishment and something that is squirming inside of me, writhing, growing bigger and stronger with every cursed, miserable heartbeat.

_I've been sleeping with a boy you've never met, over and over, and you never even became suspicious about it._ No matter how hard I try to say it, my lips remain closed.

“Amanda,” Emily says again and steps closer. “You can tell me. Did it happen again? Are you starting to—”

“It’s nothing. I said!”

The blanket that we usually lie upon is settled over the dirt in the same spot as always. The memory of us entangled on the blanket, thrusting against each other and crying out in pleasure, causes my chest to flush with warmth beneath my calico dress. With the excited feeling comes the usual guilt, the automatic force that seeps into the good feelings and stains them like ink.

*Fifth. Selfish filth.*
“Henry?” I call out softly. My eyes scan the woods behind General. “I have something to tell you, darling.” My heart startles at the feeling of his hands suddenly around my waist from behind, pulling me back into him, and the front of his pants is already bulging.

“Hello, my love,” he whispers into my ear with that rough, eager voice. “I would be lying if I said I wasn’t envious of that candy in your mouth.”

I need to be solemn, but the hungry manner of his speaking causes me to laugh. I cannot help it.

“Oh, really?” I say and withdraw the candy. I spin around to face him, and now his bulge is pressed against my groin. His hands wander wildly over my backside. “Want a taste, then?”

And he’s kissing me now, deep and long with sugary bursts of peppermint. I let him, to draw him in, to make this easier on myself. I need him to want me. His hands leave my backside and find themselves groping my sore breasts with vigor. I wince at the pressure.

“Take this cursed dress off.” He pulls away from my mouth long enough to make the demand before he starts tasting my ear, my neck, my collarbone. “I cannot wait to have you today.”
“You said that you loved me,” I repeat over and over, and now I feel as though I’m watching all of this from the outside instead of being in it. “Why has your heart turned in such a manner?”

“Listen,” Henry says. “I enjoyed you a lot, Amanda. You came into town with your pa that one day to use my post, and I couldn’t take my eyes off you. I would have continued doing this for as long as you wanted. I would have.”

Bastard. The word hits me like a dirty curse and sends my heart into a panic. My baby will be a bastard. An earthworm sprawls over itself in the freshly turned soil. It’s unfair, I consider as I watch it try to burrow back down. It has no way of comprehending what is happening to it. It thinks it might die.
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Most of them broken, lay scattered over the ground.

There is a dark substance, a stinking liquid that covers the entire edge of the torn out floor. Even as much as I don’t want to believe it, I know that the liquid is, unquestionably, blood. There is more of it splattered up the sides of the peeling bark walls, and a broken chair amongst the wreckage is also ruined with the red. Fat black flies the size of coins buzz against the filthy glass window that lines the back wall.

As terrible as the sight is, as positively jarring, it is nothing compared to the smell. Emily and Ma and I recoil and groan, our arms over our faces as we peer into the mess of a cabin. It is the smell of rot, thick and warm, it is the unmistakable smell of death. And it is heavy.

*If only she could have just one day away from that baby...* I think. *Damn that baby. Damn that winter.*
I knew immediately that it was a lie. When my hands were on his naked body, he had all the time in the world.

“You didn't mention a time restraint before,” I said softly, and slid the dress over my head.

“No pouting,” Henry commanded. “I shall be back again when the month is half through, then again on the first of the next. Check for my signal.”

“All right,” I agreed with a sigh. I stood up, buttoned my dress, and shook my hair out before rebraiding it to look as neat as a pin. “Farewell then, I suppose.”

“You know I cannot wait,” Henry said as he hopped up, still naked, and pulled me toward him for more kisses. “And I’ll be thinking about how sweet your lips taste until.”

“Do you love me?” I asked, lacing my fingers together behind his back. “Like you said earlier?”

“Of course I love you.” To hear him say it while I was clothed filled me with a profound sense of hope, an unexpected but welcomed result in addition to how much I enjoyed myself with him physically. Besides pleasure, Henry now also offered me hope for a future, and love, somewhere so far away from that cursed mountain. “What on earth could ever keep me away?”

I feel a terrible rush of wetness and grab beneath my nightshirt, in between my legs. My hand comes back covered in blood, thick and rich and disgustingly fra-
the cool morning air. Even as the tears pour down my hot face and I stifle another scream with my clean hand, I know what has happened.

You got what you prayed for.

I sob into my skirt, holding my shaking and bloodied hand as far away from me as I can.

No, no, no.

With each wave of searing pain I see Henry’s face. How it studied mine with such curiosity the first time we met, when I came to the mountain town with my pa. How it twisted in pleasure while he rode me in the woods behind our cabin with animalistic urgency. How it gazed upon me in disgust when I told him I carried his child.

The agony continues longer than I could have ever imagined. I hear someone behind me before I see them. In my delirium of pain I assume it’s Ma or Pa, come to find me out and bash my head in as punishment. When it’s Emily who sinks beside me and pulls my head into her chest all I can think is, at least there’s that. Then I hear my own screams and mistake them for my baby’s and pray that I die anyway.

I sit with my sister, wailing into her lap, while she rocks me back and forth, and my baby gushes from my body and soaks into the earth.
When the bleeding finally stops, the sun is dangerously close to peeking up and over the horizon of the flatlands. My sister knows that we have very little time.

“We need to move,” she whispers into my hair, after my cries have died away. “I’m so sorry, Amanda, but we need to move now.”

So I frantically rub my hand, still coated in the terrible crimson, against a slew of dried grasses before wiping away the excess muck on a clean spot of my nightshirt. After hiding the blood-soaked shirt underneath a divot in the earth that is covered by dense growths of waist-length grass, Emily asks me if I’m all right.

“I do not know,” I say in a shaking voice as I stand naked before her. The insides of my thighs are still smeared with the heavy blood. “My baby is dead, Emily.”

Suddenly my knees are shaking and feel as though they are about to give out, and I sway with the baby’s added weight. I hear Ma outside, using the pump, standing in remnants of her own grandchild, and I have to sit down with Hannah on the spot to keep from fainting. My baby sister clings to me, all but asking for me to return the affection, but I just look down at her as the world descends into madness around me.
The blood drying on my legs is unclean, excess sin that stinks of a much different future than what I’ve prepared myself for in the past months. Still, I feel heavier instead of lighter, and sick with lingering cramps as we walk back to the cabin in silence. Emily wraps her arms around my shoulders so I can lean on her as we make our way to the well pump.

Then, in the night, I hear the sound of the crying infant again, right outside the end of the cabin, around where the well pump is. I’m still groggy from sleep, and something in my head tells me that it’s my baby crying for me, that I have to get to it, but once I stand up and awaken a bit more I realize that it isn’t possible, that my baby died early this morning and there shouldn’t be any sound outside the cabin at all.

Yet the crying carries on, loud enough to wake everybody up, and my family continues to sleep as though it isn’t happening. I refuse to accept that the Lord would
mock me in such a way. I walk outside and around the corner of the cabin, stubborn and sure, the moonbeams casting a silver glow over the prairie. With each step I challenge the sound of the crying to carry on.

There’s no way that I am going to see a baby lying on the bloodied ground beneath the pump when I turn the corner. It simply isn’t possible. Yet the sound continues, growing louder as I approach the back of the cabin. I continue holding my breath, even though my chest is beginning to hurt, and step into the back clearing.

The crying stops instantly. As if to confirm my victory, I walk up to the well pump and rest my hand on it. There’s nothing out here; like I suspected, there are only the sounds of my mind. But why have I heard the cries twice now, once before I lost my baby, and once after?
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The eyes belong to a baby. A baby, standing upright in the grass, staring at me without a motion or a sound. My spine feels alive, like there are ants crawling over it deep beneath the muscle, and my breath catches in my throat.

The baby still hasn’t moved by the time I start walking, backward, toward the front of the cabin. Even after the figure fades from my view into the shadows, I don’t turn my back in fear that it will get me. Once the front door is in sight, I bolt for it.

I climb back into bed, my blood uneasy and my heart pounding in my ears, and that’s when the crying starts up again, just outside the wall near the well pump. Nobody stirs, and this time I am not surprised. They are not the ones being haunted.

_Haunted._

I am being haunted by the ghost of my unborn child.

PROFANITY COUNT approximate (and other sensitive words)
Did not get full count – time was limited
*ss 2
b*stard

RED FLAGS
Sexual Content

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools