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Gabe



Synopsis

Coming of age in the Age of Aquarius. Author Shelley Gill was seventeen-years-old in 1972 and a free spirit protesting the Vietnam War, marching for civil rights, and finding her way in a changing world. While volunteering in the medical tent at the first Rainbow Gathering in Granby, Colorado, Shelley met Gabe—a blue merle husky mix puppy abandoned by his owner. Gabe quickly became Shelley's best friend and protector. They travelled the country together, hitchhiking to New Orleans, to Indiana, to New York City, to the Rocky Mountains, and eventually to Alaska, where they stayed. Shelley Gill has lived full-force, grabbing life by the horns and not letting go. Her spirit and attitude are ever-present in this autobiography, which is a snapshot of a turbulent time in American history, as well as a love-letter to cherished dog.

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Customer Reviews

The older I get the more I like children's books that don't slot easily into neat little categories. Gone are the days when every book you read was easily cataloged, neat as a pin. It may be a nightmarish wasteland out there for catalogers, but the fluidity of books

these days speaks to their abilities to serve different kinds of readers in different kinds of areas. Even biography sections of libraries and bookstores are morphing. I remember when Siena Siegel's *To Dance* was published and we, the children's librarians, had to come to terms with the fact that we had an honest-to-goodness children's graphic novel autobiography on our hands (a rare beastie indeed). I've not really seen a book to shake up the biography sections in a similar way since. That is, until now. *Gabe: A Story of Me, My Dog, and the 1970s* is a textbook case of not being a textbook case. Autobiographical and deeply visual, it offers a slice of 1970s life never approached in this manner in a children's book before. Different kinds of readers require different kinds of books to feed their little brains. This is a book for dog and pet readers, throwing them into the past headfirst and keeping them there thanks to some truly beautiful art. An original. Growing up in Florida, Shelley Gill had enough of the vapid, polluted culture she'd grown up with. At seventeen she was out. The year was 1972 and Shelley was volunteering in the medical tent of the first Rainbow Gathering at Table Mountain. When she wasn't patching up people she was patching up pets. And there was one pet in particular, a blue merle husky mix she named Gabe. When the party was over, Gabe was left and so Shelley kept him by her side. Together they hitchhiked, lived in New Orleans for a time, tried Colorado, suffered through NYC, were parted, reunited, and ultimately found their final home in Alaska. Gill chronicles her life through the dog that helped make that life possible. Backmatter consists of five great historical moments alluded to in the book. When I was growing up, the 1970s was just that decade we never quite got to in history class because we ran out of time by the end of the school year (thanks, WWII). A child of the 1980s myself, it would take me years and years and a significant chunk of my adult life to get a grasp on that time period. Children's books that talk about the 70s or are set in the 70s aren't exactly plentiful. Either they're entirely about the Vietnam War or the Civil Rights movement or . . . yeah. No. That's about it. So Shelley Gill's decision to place her own story inextricably within the times in which she lived is fascinating. She starts off not with Woodstock (as you might expect) but the far lesser known Rainbow Gathering of 1972. Backmatter relays information about The Vietnam War, the protests, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and The Age of Aquarius. None of it is enough to serve as a focus for the story, but they do at least offer context and groundwork for kids willing to seek out additional information on their own on any of the mentioned topics. It's a surprisingly slight book for the chunk of Gill's life that

it contains. That may have more to do with the author's square focus on the dog more than anything else. Gabe is first and foremost the center of the book. Gill's marriage, and even her eventual commitment to dog sledding, pale in the face of this owner/pet love story. In 2011 Adam Gopnik wrote a piece for The New Yorker called "Dog Story" in which he talked about pet owners' blind adoration of their own dogs. It's a fun piece because, amongst other things, it really clarified for me the fact that I am just not a dog person. If you have a friendly dog, you'll pet it like crazy and enjoy its company, but other people's dogs are like other people's children. You appreciate their existence on this globe (hopefully) but wouldn't necessarily want one of your own. The interesting thing about "Gabe" is that Gill makes no bones about his bad qualities. She loves him, psychopathic tendencies and all. He is her constant companion through thick and thin and (craziest of all) the 1970s. I don't feel particularly gushy towards dogs, but a good writer allows you to feel emotions that aren't your own. And in that last page, where Shelley cuddles her dying dog? That, I felt. The text is great, no question, but would be merely okay with a lesser illustrator. So a lot of the heavy lifting going on in this title is due the talents of Marc Scheff. I would love to hear the story of how Marc came to this particular book. A quick look at his various websites and you can see that he describes himself as the kind of artist who creates, "portraits that blend the fantastic and the surreal." In "Gabe" Scheff scales back his more sumptuous tendencies, but not by much. He's sticking to reality for the most part, but there's one moment, when people are exchanging rumors of an escaped devil dog terrorizing the citizens of New Orleans, where he allows the paper he paints to gorge itself in a blood red beast awash in snarls and drool. Shelley herself is the kind of woman Scheff typically likes to paint. A 20th century Rossetti model, all flowing hair and latent hippie tendencies. Farrah Fawcett would have been envious. And Gabe is consistently fascinating to watch throughout. Scheff's challenge was to make him tame enough that a girl would do anything to keep him by her side, but also wild enough to attack at a moment's notice. For the book to work you have to like Gabe on some level. That may be the most difficult challenge of the book, but Scheff is up to the task and the end result is a dog that, at the very least, you respect on some level. For all that I love the art of the book, there is one element of the design I'd change in a heartbeat, if I had that power. That would be (and this is going to sound crazy to you if you haven't seen the book yet) the size of the font on each new

chapter's first page. Somebody somewhere made the executive decision to shrink that font down to teeny, tiny, itty-bitty, oh-so-miniscule words. In some chapters this is clearly done to fit a large amount of text into a particular part of the accompanying illustrations. The trouble is that it just looks awful. Right from the bat it sets the wrong tone for everything. It was with great relief that I turned the first page to discover a far larger, lovelier font for most of the rest of the book. Yet with every new chapter there it would be again. That small, horrid little font. A weird complaint, you bet, but for a book that relies so heavily on attractive visuals, this seems an unfortunate misstep. The more graphic and visual a children's book, the more opportunities to really put the reader in a historical time and place. For the 9-year-old that picks up and reads this book, the 1970s might as well be the 1670s. Yet together Gill and Scheff transport their young readers. From the sweltering heat of New Orleans to the dry chill under an Aurora Borealis, you are there. Gill writes what she knows and what she knows is the story of her best dog. A moving, eye-popping, ambitious, genre-busting little number. I guarantee you this - you'll find nothing else like it on your bookshelves today. For ages 9 and up.

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