



A Lovely, Indecent Departure

Steven Lee Gilbert

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A Lovely, Indecent Departure is the riveting and emotionally-charged debut from a promising new voice in literary thrillers, and a captivating story about a mother's love and desperation set amidst the heart wrenching landscape of child custody.

Anna Miller wants only one thing, her son, and she will do anything to keep him. When a district court awards custody of Oliver to his father, she abducts the five year old and flees to Italy where with her family's help they disappear into the fabric of her native homeland. Told in prose that is both stripped-down and overpowering, Gilbert shapes the everyday conflict of child custody into a stunning search for sense of worth. Standing in the young woman's way is Evan Meade, the boy's guileful and mean-spirited father, who hires a private investigator when the efforts of the embattled local sheriff, Monroe Rossi, fail to track them down. But as the investigation draws them all closer to Anna, Evan's true nature betrays itself and the question of what's in the child's best interest becomes not so clear anymore.

Objectively detailed, in a voice that refuses to intrude on the minds of its characters, *A Lovely, Indecent Departure*, captures in stark detail a world in which modern archetypes are turned upside down and shows what an extraordinary splash Steven Lee Gilbert has made with his first novel.

A Lovely, Indecent Departure Details

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From Reader Review A Lovely, Indecent Departure for online ebook

Chris Thompson says

Steven Lee Gilbert writes with conviction and purpose in his debut novel, *A Lovely, Indecent Departure*, but he has everything all wrong. The novel plods along slowly and tediously, and Gilbert's decision not to let the reader into the minds of his characters makes the story lifeless as well. Because the reader doesn't know what's going on inside their heads, the characters are more like empty vessels than human beings, awaiting direction from the author. When Gilbert makes them do something shocking, I don't feel he's earned it, because the plot leading up to that moment gives no indication the character was capable of such action. The novel wants to be morally ambiguous as well, but even here it fails. In order to achieve this goal would have required greater insight into the situation and into the motivations of its characters. Failing to provide such information, the novel ends up being morally disturbing instead.

The plot seems intriguing at first. Anna, a divorced mother, decides to abduct her son, Oliver, who was given custody to his father, Evan. Anna gets to see Oliver on weekends, but Evan does everything he can to ensure she sees him for as little time as possible. On this particularly weekend, Evan demands that Anna bring Oliver back four hours earlier than she has him for, but Anna has other plans.

From some early scenes we see that Evan can be a jerk, especially towards Anna. However, there is no indication that he is a bad father. He is strict, sure, but strictness is not bad parenting - quite the opposite, in fact. I only point this out because it helps to determine why Anna makes the decision to abduct her son. If Gilbert is able to establish that the court's decision to leave Oliver in his father's custody is a bad one, because Evan abuses his son, for example, then I could possibly sympathize with Anna. Otherwise, if Evan is nothing more than a jerk, Anna's decision suggests a mental illness, perhaps even idiocy. In fact, there's no indication she has thought through her plans very far, though she has help from her family in Italy. That she tries to live a normal life in Italy under her Italian family's surname (not even changing her first name) suggests she wants to be caught. She's too obvious. To add to that, we find that Oliver is clearly not happy, though Gilbert avoids suggesting that it is because he is not with his father, and the principal of his school takes notice. I don't have any sympathy for a woman who would do this to her child.

However, it's clear that we're supposed to cheer for Anna and view Evan as the bad guy. The problem is, Gilbert fails to provide any proof that Evan is a bad guy until some plot developments towards the end that are not earned. That the sheriff and a private investigator suspect Evan is to blame for his wife's actions makes the reader more sympathetic to him. These characters seem convinced that Evan is a monster, but nothing convincing suggests that he is. The mistake Gilbert makes is in not revealing anything monstrous Evan has done during his marriage to Anna. The fact that the court awards him custody suggests he is more capable of raising his son than she is.

In an article on his blog, Gilbert asserts that what happens prior to the divorce is irrelevant. This is wrong. In order to sympathize with Anna, the reader needs to know why we should believe Evan is a monster. Simply stating that he is a monster is not enough. We need reasons. Without key background information, the novel exists in a void, as though the characters began their life only at the start of the novel, and not before. When Evan makes some drastic decisions at the end, there is nothing to suggest he was moving in that direction. The author told him to act and he did. He did not act on his own. In this case, I guess it really doesn't matter what happened before the divorce. The actions of the characters are predetermined and require no development up to that moment. It's as though we're reading a story about robots and not people with

feelings, opinions, and life.

Gilbert borrows his writing style heavily from Cormac McCarthy. This is true in the sentence structure, but he lacks the poetry of McCarthy's language. Gilbert's sentences don't flow with the same life as McCarthy's. Where McCarthy can describe a character drinking a cold beer in such a way that the reader can taste the beer, Gilbert comes off as repetitive and long-winded, particularly with his use of the word "and" to connect several mundane actions. More obviously borrowed is the dialogue, written without quotation marks. However, the dialogue has the same problems as the rest of the writing.

Gilbert overuses some elements of dialogue that can be effective in small doses. For one, there are far too many occasions when one character does not respond to another. Here is a common sentence in the novel: "Evan didn't answer." This kind of non-response is supposed to suggest something has been said that Evan does not like, or that he has something to hide. However, it seems more likely that the characters have nothing going on in their heads. This is clear in some of the dialogue. Too often a character asks for clarification about the reference of a pronoun that is painfully obvious. Here's an example of what I mean:

"Long enough that she wouldn't call to tell me where she stole off with her son.
Did you know the boy?
What boy?
Her son."

That the boy in this dialogue exchange refers to her son is so obvious there's no need to clarify. It's an insult to the reader's intelligence, and it also makes the characters seem dimwitted. This kind of exchange is common throughout the book, and it nearly had me pulling out my hair. I also don't understand the need for lengthy dialogue exchanges in Italian. I mean, I get it. Cormac McCarthy and Ernest Hemingway have characters who speak Spanish here and there, but it's usually just a brief sentence and it's generally translated by the narrator. There are frustrating moments where two or more characters carry on a somewhat lengthy conversation entirely in Italian. If what these characters have to say is not important enough to write in English, it should have been scrapped.

I haven't even mentioned the third POV character, after Anna and Evan, and that is Sheriff Monroe. Monroe is not essential to the story. He does not help solve the case, and when he does any investigating, he comes up empty-handed. Monroe's scenes add nothing of interest. I did not care about his romance with the local librarian, or the vague criticisms of his police department, or his troubles with his ailing father, or his scenes with his teenage daughter. Gilbert could have profited immensely from removing Monroe from the story and instead focusing on developing Anna and Evan and their situation so the reader could actually care about the outcome of the story.

Dorothy Gilbert says

The ending was a surprise. Great book and subject matter, well written with real characters the reader can relate to. (yes gramatically incorrect)

Sandie says

Anna had to leave. Caught in a marriage with a man who needed to control her every move, she left for her sanity. But she never meant to leave Oliver, her five year old son. When Evan, her ex-husband, tries to manipulate her through Oliver, making her joint custody more and more difficult, she makes a momentous decision.

Since Anna has joint citizenship with both the United States and Italy, she is able to take Oliver and flee overseas. She leaves everything else behind; job, house, family, friends. Her remote relatives, most of whom she hasn't seen since she was a small girl, help her to get reestablished in Florence. But can Evan ever concede failure in what he regards as a battle to establish his rightful dominance?

Evan enlists the big guns. He goes to the police, for Anna has indeed committed a crime, kidnapping. He goes to the press to make sure his side of the story is the one that gets told. Finally, after months with no results, he hires a private investigator to locate Anna and kidnap Oliver back. Evan's single focus brings the rest of his world into jeopardy; his job and marriage soon show the cracks of his obsession.

Steven Gilbert has written a masterful debut novel. The reader can empathize with each character in turn and the motives that drive their actions. The writing is crisp and spare, yet portrays each side of this situation; mother, father, law enforcement, family and friends, fully. Gilbert lives in the Piedmont region of NC. In 2007 he was the recipient of a Durham Arts Council Emerging Artist Grant for Literature. A Lovely, Indecent Departure is recommended for all readers interested in a compelling story and excellent character portrayal.

Scott Bischke says

Steven Lee Gilbert is a talented writer who tells an interesting story of a broken family. It's a plot so topical today, I suspect that this book would make a great movie or TV show. Gilbert's writing is compelling, key to me as the storyline here is a bit outside my normal genre. The book pulled me along, as the point of view switches between the main characters. I greatly enjoyed the aspects of travel to Italy and the interspersion of Italian into the narrative (I am thinking the author must be fluent in Italian?). The plot closes in a crescendo, with all forces converging as one might hope, though the ending is a bit open giving the reader ample opportunity to imagine what s/he may.

Wall-to-wall books - wendy says

Oh my goodness I just loved this book! This was a page turner if I ever read one. I absolutely HAD to know what was going to happen.

I, right away, felt a connection to this book. Maybe it was because I am a divorced mother and went through hell with visitations when my daughter was young until I finally got full custody and my current husband could adopt her as his own. Everytime "her father" took her for visitation I was worried he wouldn't bring her back. And yes, I did think of just taking her and running away - several times actually! But I stuck it out and waited. This story could have been about me and my daughter! I don't think the author had any idea when he asked me to review this of the connection I would have with it.

I don't think you have to go through any of this to fully enjoy or connect with the book though. It is so well written, the characters so well developed, the "on-the-edge-of-your-seat" plot so interesting - it all keeps you reading and wondering what will happen next.

It is written in third person about three main characters.

Anna, the Mom - She takes her son (Oliver) and runs away to Florence Italy and is in hiding from her ex-husband. I loved Anna and felt such a connection to her, of course. She was portrayed as such a great, kind, and loving mom. With the full support of an extended family was able to pull this off.

Evan, the Dad - you start out thinking - how bad could he be? right? He just wants his son back and will do ANYTHING to get him. But when revenge against Anna becomes far more important than his son you find out what he is capable of.

Monroe, the Sheriff - During the whole investigation you are kept wondering what is his part in all this, and where does he stand. Who's side is he on? Even in the end you are not sure what really happened - which I think was perfect. Sometimes you are not meant to know everything.

"The law itself doesn't keep people from doing bad things. Its the fear of getting caught, or as you put it, the risk of going to jail. In most cases there's nothing especially remarkable about people who break the law. Take this boy's mother for instance. She's probably not very different from any other law abiding citizen you might run into. She works to provide for herself and her son. She pays her taxes. She's a vital part of the community. In fact, the only real difference between her and anyone else is where one has hope the other has none and filling that hole is something called desperation." That says it all! An abused woman or a single mother does act out of desperation. That's all she feel in times like those - desperate.

One of my favorite touching scenes between mother and son -

"Why yellow?"

I don't know. It makes me think of you. Like the sun.

Okay.

She let him take her hand and ease it down into the yellow paint. He pushed down gently on the back of her hand, making sure the paint oozed into all the creases.

Doesn't that feel like the sun? he asked, then he whispered into her ear: Just pretend." Wow this brings tears to my eyes, it is so touching.

All the characters are equally developed. You get to know each one. And even though it is written in third person I think the author did an excellent job at showing their personalities. It was different, but I liked it. It gave you a better sense of everything that was happening instead of just one person's point of view. Also - there are no quotation marks for the conversations! This bugged me for about one page, LOL. Then I got used to it, then I kind of liked it and saw its purpose. Its like we are not really meant to hear them, its like were are eavesdropping on private moments, like spying through a window.

There were a couple of shockers that kept the story interesting. Even though I had hopes for a happy ending - I truly didn't know which way it was going to turn.

THE ALL-IN-ALL -

All in all this was a very beautiful, suspenseful, intense, sad, and touching story! And I loved the whole Italian flair. There were several parts written in Italian and I don't know any Ital. but I loved it! It made it so much more real. This story reminded me very much of another of my favorite books - "The Escape Artist" by Diane Chamberlain, which was also about a mother taking her son and going into hiding.

* There is some swearing and violence.

Jamie says

A great, sharp story with pages you want to keep turning. I wanted to read this book, and when Steven was the one who sent me a copy himself, it admittedly lurked in the back of my mind: "Oh no, what if I hate it." Well, no worries there. As full as this week has been, I read it in one afternoon.

I liked so much that some of the biggest questions weren't answered in black and white: Anna's past, Evan and Anna's marriage. Because they *weren't* questions, you know from the present the past exactly. The dialogue never loses its way.

What I'd read, too, is a whole book about Monroe and Grace.

Bill Cokas says

Gripping and harrowing, it's every parent's worst nightmare, but Anna carries forward like a woman possessed. She wins us over early on and never loses our empathy or attention. Gilbert handles this material with a deft balance, never stooping to theatrics or melodrama. After you read this, you'll hug your children tighter and give your spouse a second look.

guiltlessreader says

Originally posted on my blog [Guiltless Reading](#)

Leaving may be lovely ... but not any easier.

The book in one sentence: A woman flees an abusive husband to protect her child.

My two cents: The juxtaposition of the words in the title sort of prepared me for the unusual way this seemingly straightforward story was written. Lovely yet indecent. How aptly true for Anna, our main character. And how aptly true for this book overall, which is a lovely departure from the predictable good guy-bad guy story.

The book opens with Anna described thus: "... she is not one of them, and never has been." It is a foreshadowing of events to come and the discovery of why "she is not one of them."

We are introduced to the family: Anna, the mother; Evan, the father; Oliver, their five-year-old-son. We learn that she and her husband are divorced, Oliver is in his father's custody and Anna having only visitation rights. Right off, I ask myself, why? Typically custody is awarded to the mother. Hmmm ... is there something wrong with Anna?

The story starts off quietly and slowly, with Anna coming to pick up Oliver for her regular visit. We are rewarded with small glimpses into Anna's and Evan's strained relationship, and how loving Anna is to Oliver. Then the rather offputting cruelty of Evan in his small gesture of shredding Oliver's handmade

birthday card to his mother.

That is the last time Evan sees Oliver and then a wild search for the kidnapped and the kidnapper ensues. The tension is built up slowly, and with the introduction of new characters and the unfolding of events, we learn the "facts" of the story and the back stories of the characters ... sort of like peeling back the skins of an onion, or putting together the pieces of the puzzle. Yes, there is a bigger picture ... but Gilbert masterfully only lets us in when he feels we must.

I really liked these elements of the book:

The title which is unusual and jarring in its juxtaposition.

The cover which captures both the richness of Italy, where Anna flees; as well as the relationship between mother and child in classic and elegant sculpture no less.

How the characters are multi-dimensional so that I kept flip-flopping trying to make out who the good guy - bad guy was. Conclusion: there is no good guy or bad guy; it is not as simple as that. Anna: bad because she kidnapped her son? Evan: bad because he has a horrible temper? Anna: good ... because she kidnapped her son? People have their motivations, their personalities, their strengths, their flaws. In fact, Gilbert described Anna as an "anti-hero" which seems to better capture the complexity of people.

An appreciation for just how complicated child custody cases are! This story humanizes one case but it does raise many questions in my mind about Anna and Evan, and of how custody cases are decided. Up until the end of the book, I kept wondering why custody was awarded to Evan in the first place.

The quietness and elegance of the language. I felt like that this story grew on me, like someone whispering a story to me in the dead of the night. It is so quietly told that there were times when I wondered when the shouting would start. Completing the book, I realize that the tension was so well built up that no shouting was required.

Uh-Ohs

The first thing that bothered me was that there were no quotation marks as soon as a dialogue kicked in. I first thought it was a typo ... until I realized maybe a few chapters in that it was intentional! (How could an author do this to their readers? Flout all conventions for the heck of it?!) However, as I kept reading I got used to it and feel that this device (or lack thereof) dispensed of how "cluttered" the page would look and provided for a seamlessness of action and dialogue.

A warning that there are Italian phrases peppered throughout, initially confusing but got me looking things up. For the most part I could figure things out based on context.

There are some side stories (particularly that of the personal life of detective Monroe) that I felt could have been tightened up a bit as they distracted from the main storyline.

Verdict: A quietly and elegantly told story, highly recommended for those looking for an insightful probe into the emotional and legal complexities of child custody.

First line: Look, here comes the girl. She is treading alone up the sidewalk. Looking like everyone else of the noontime crowd blissfully strolling the strip mall. But she is not one of them, and never has been.

Last Line: Then he turned back and stood with his feet wide apart to steady himself against the tide's current and he reached his arms out to the boy.

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. I have also hosted Steven Lee Gilbert's guest post "A Lovely Anti-Hero" and a giveaway of this book. Check out my Friday 56/Book Beginnings post.

Andrew says

Wow! You know a book is really good when you finish it and you want to go hang out with some of the characters (not all of them, mind you :).

Love the descriptions of locations and the development of characters - felt like I was part of the story.

Melissa T says

This review was originally posted on Melissa's Midnight Musings on September 12, 2012

I'm not really sure quite where to start with *A Lovely, Indecent Departure*. I wanted to like it, I really did. Unfortunately it just did not work for me at all.

The major problem that I had with this book was that there are no quotation marks around any of the dialogue. None. I know that probably seems like a petty, insignificant thing to have a problem with, but it truly did make a difference in how I read this book. Of course it's easy to tell when people are talking just by the nature of the words, but the quotes make it easier to differentiate, and faster to read. Without them, it's like reading page after page of prose, and it all tends to run together after a while.

Along that same line, some of the sections of the text are in Italian. This wasn't as major a problem for me because most of the time it was indirectly translatable, where you could tell what's being said. Plus, I took 4 years of Spanish in high school, and the two languages are similar enough for me to have gotten most of it. Still, there were certain sections where I missed what was being said entirely and it wasn't translated, so that was a little rough too.

For the most part, the story is decent. I did really feel for Anna and understood why she wanted to take Oliver away. Mainly, it was because Evan was a major A-hole. He is abusive, controlling and in some ways deadly. I won't give away any plot spoilers with him, but lets just say that it's easy not to like him. I would have liked to have known more about Anna and Evan's relationship and why they got together in the first place, or what she saw in him. These things are mentioned in brief snippets, but more background would have created a more urgent situation for why she had to abduct Oliver to Italy. I also would have liked to see more of the story from Oliver's perspective. There were just a few lines here and there and then a chapter at

the end. I understood that the story is mainly focused on the adults, but I think Oliver's is a key perspective that was missed in the story.

There's a cute little romance between the sheriff and the town librarian, so that's a nice change of pace from the seriousness, but Monroe's character fell flat for me. I didn't understand what his real role was, because it seems like he wasn't doing much at all and just trying to avoid the situation of Oliver's kidnap altogether. Of course, since the FBI was involved I suppose there wasn't much he could really do, which makes me wonder why his character is so central. I think that his character's chapters could have been replaced by chapters from the perspective of Carl Demski, the FBI agent on the case and the story may have worked better.

I have to say that the scenes and parts of the book that describe Italy are really well done. There are a lot of cultural references and descriptions (as well as the use of Italian) that put the reader into the story, so that you almost believe you are in Italy while you're reading. This was a very nice touch.

Overall, the story was nice, but it just didn't suck me in like I was hoping it would. I'd recommend this to anyone who wants to learn a bit more about Italy.

Please note I received a copy of this book from the author in exchange for an honest review.

Dee says

It was great... A spell binding novel. I couldn't put it down, while at the same time afraid to turn the page.

I highly recommend this book...

Naomi says

What gripping emotion this book held and that everything on the surface isn't quite what it appears. This author utilized words and his storyline masterfully to keep me, as a reader, engaged.

I loved that the book wasn't written in such a way that the abductor (Anna Meade) wasn't an "awful" person and that Evan Meade or his new wife weren't quite the stellar individuals that one would see in most books, which comes off as black/white.

Now, on a side note, I must say that I took the storyline a bit different and felt that the antagonist/protagonist roles a bit differently than a number of other reviewers. In the beginning, I truly felt that it was Evan as the protagonist and Anna as the antagonist (she did kidnap her son after all). What was truly rockin' about this book, is that the author was able to turn that around (in my head) and elicit sympathy for Anna, who then became the protagonist with Evan as the antagonist. What was masterful is that, in my humble opinion, he was able to do this with the slightest of moves and underneath the surface. Although in the book's description, it describes Evan as mean-spirited, as one reads the book, it came across to me as "eh, it is just your typical he said, she said divorce situation". However, as one continues to read it suddenly becomes apparent that that is probably not the case.

The quality in this book is a perfect example of Indie authors being able to hold their own in regards to larger

publishing house authors and that those readers who dismiss Indie authors are truly missing out. The thing to boot, is that this is a debut author. Imagine what is to come from this author!!

So, why not a full five stars. I felt that there was SOME redundancy or "information" thrown into the book, particularly related to the private investigator and sheriff. I thought scenes could have been either tighter writer or omitted all together.

Robin says

With thoughtful character development in A Lovely, Indecent Departure, it was easy to quickly get wrapped up in the life of Anna as she tries to rescue her son from her overbearing ex, Evan. While she is safely in Italy with her son, your hatred for Evan develops as you journey with him (and local authorities) on his escapade to find the young boy. Or is it Anna that he wants to find to further torment? This book does not lack in suspense and is thrilling 'till the end.

Brenda Knight says

I received a paperback copy of this book from the author in exchange for an honest review. I was not acquainted with Mr. Gilbert until he contacted me to read and review this book.

I wanted to read this book in the hopes that someone who took their child to protect them, (with good reason), actually got away with it. I won't tell you if my hopes were realized or not. You will have to read it for yourself.

I fully understood and related to Anna. I was married to a man that made Evan look like a grumpy teddy bear. Thank heavens I never had a child with him. Just like Evan, he didn't show his true colors to the rest of the world. In cases like this, the wife/mother is rarely believed about how bad things are or how dangerous the husband/father really is.

I enjoyed meeting the different characters in the book. (Except for Evan, of course.) I felt each was well thought out and written so you got a really good idea of who they were and what they were about.

The story was well written and kept me turning the pages eagerly to see what would happen next. It could have been more suspenseful if Evan was portrayed with even more malice. But overall a really good story that moves along well keeping the readers' interest through the end.

I would have liked a little more info about what happened to the parent who was not with Oliver at the end of the story. I was very curious about that and somewhat disappointed that there was no information to explain where they were when it was all said and done.

All in all a well written very good read. I would recommend it to anyone who likes a good story that is well written with fully developed characters.

Meganm922 says

I enjoyed this book a lot. It was broken up into different character's narrations, which was well done. I felt like I knew each one of the characters involved, even when bits of information and pieces to the puzzle were missing. This was definitely more of a character driven novel than a plot driven novel, but was still unpredictable and I kept turning the page to find out what pieces to the puzzle would be discovered next.

One of the best aspects about this book is that the reader is thrown into the story and doesn't know the whole story. We as readers are finding out what happened and why about as fast as the other characters, and Anna doesn't spell it out for us. I enjoyed this a lot. I felt like it kept me on my toes and kept me interested. Instead of bombarding us with information or the backstory as to why Anna leaves with her son, we are piecing it together as we go. I feel like it makes us judge the characters less harshly, too

After I put it down, I still had questions about Anna and Evan's relationship and what led her to leave. I wondered what the letter Evan wrote her before their battle turned into the courts said. I think a truly good novel is one that keeps us thinking even after the final page is read, and this book did that for me.

At first, I realized the dialogue was not put into quotations. It's written just like any other sentence is written. This irked me to no end at the beginning, but I quickly realized that it did something to the story. I still don't know why no quotations were done, but I think it made the past somehow more distant. I'm not sure why I ended up loving the choice, but I did. It wasn't difficult to figure out what was dialogue and what was not, so I went with it and thought it was a good decision.

This book was well written, incredibly descriptive and multiple storylines are present, which are all equally interesting. Each character showed growth, whether good or bad. I think a lot of books, especially character driven books, can end up giving the reader too much information, too much backstory, especially when written from different points of view. Somehow, Gilbert was able to give us a lot of insight to the characters without a boring or overstimulated narration and without being plot driven. There are a lot of things I still don't know about the characters, yet I feel like I know them well. I think this shows a lot of talent and skill and I will definitely be on the lookout for more of Gilbert's novels.

I definitely recommend this book. It's a literary novel, a thriller, a mystery all wrapped up in one package.
<http://meganm922.blogspot.com/2012/05...>
