



Eden Springs

Laura Kasischke

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In 1903, a preacher named Benjamin Purnell and five followers founded a colony called the House of David in Benton Harbor, Michigan, where they prepared for eternal life by creating a heaven on earth. Housed in rambling mansions and surrounded by lush orchards and vineyards, the colony added a thousand followers to its fold within a few years, along with a zoo, extensive gardens, and an amusement park. The sprawling complex, called Eden Springs, was a major tourist attraction of the Midwest. The colonists, who were drawn from far and wide by the magnetic “King Ben,” were told to keep their bodies pure by not cutting their hair, eating meat, or engaging in sexual relations. Yet accounts of life within the colony do not reflect such an austere atmosphere, as the handsome, charming founder is described as loving music, dancing, a good joke, and in particular, the company of his attractive female followers.

In *Eden Springs*, award-winning Michigan author Laura Kasischke imagines life inside the House of David, in chapters framed by real newspaper clippings, legal documents, and accounts of former colonists. Told from the perspective of the young women who were closest to Benjamin Purnell, the novella follows a growing scandal within the colony’s walls. A gravedigger has seen something suspicious in a recently buried casket, a loyal assistant to Benjamin is plotting a cover-up, talk is swirling about unmarried girls having babies, and a rebellious girl named Lena is ready to tell the truth. In flashbacks and first-person narrative mixed with historical artifacts, Kasischke leads readers through the unraveling mystery in a lyrical patchwork as enticing and satisfying as the story itself.

Eden Springs lets readers inside the enchanting and eerie House of David, with an intimate look at its hedonistic highs and eventual collapse. This novella will appeal to all readers of fiction, as well as those with an interest in Michigan history.

Eden Springs Details

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From Reader Review Eden Springs for online ebook

Anna says

Video review: <http://thecollagist.com/archive/March...>

I've long felt that there is a mythic quality to Michigan; this landscape surrounded by lakes large enough to be inland seas, this peninsula that few people pass through in the natural course of their travels; this place you only arrive at if you aim for it.

And this is a place that is haunted by stories. In her novella *Eden Springs*, Laura Kasischke hones in on one of the strangest of them. In the early years of the twentieth century, the utopian community called the House of David chose the lush land of Benton Harbor, Michigan to build its village and to await an eternal life lived in the flesh.

A bit of background on this: the House of David was founded in 1903 by charismatic preacher Benjamin Purnell, a good-looking and magnetic man who was sometimes called "King Ben." Followers came after him to Benton Harbor from all over the world, about a thousand people altogether, and they built a thriving community within the small Midwestern city. The House of David was trademarked by its big, gorgeous houses, rich orchards, expansive gardens, and the world-famous zoo and amusement park that were open to the ticket-buying public. The commune played host to nationally touring bands, and it fielded a very good semi-pro baseball team that drew widespread attention not just for its skill—Satchel Page was among those hired to play for them—but for the curious sight of the House of David ballplayers sporting long uncut hair and beards. Believers in the colony wore all white, were vegetarians, and understood that sex was forbidden—except, of course, between Purnell himself and the women and girls he fancied, which turned out to be quite a lot of them.

Ultimately, after an investigation by the *Detroit Free Press*, Purnell was tried in court for "public immorality." Thirteen young women said Purnell had sex with them. The leader was expelled from the House of David in 1927 and he died a couple years later; his body was mummified and kept in a glass coffin in the community. After that, the House of David fragmented and ultimately declined.

Laura Kasischke's novella situates itself shortly before the public scandal broke, when not only are the pregnant unmarried girls drawing more than a few raised eyebrows, but there is a suspicious death at hand. Remember, this is a colony that believed in the body not dying at all; which makes the moment in *Eden Springs* especially tense when a cheap coffin of a believer reported to be a 68 year old woman slips beneath the shovel of the gravedigger—and reveals a young teenage girl inside instead.

And so begins the revelation of a cover-up, and the mystery that trills through the pages of *Eden Springs*.

Kasischke's book is built like a collage: photos, legal documents, court testimony, and news clippings about the House of David are set in the text next to the author's fictional vignettes told from the viewpoints of the colony's women and girls.

At first, I felt nonplussed by this narrative strategy; it seemed to me that Kasischke was merely using her words to illustrate the real-life ephemera of the House of David, rather than build a unique story of her own. I was concerned that the book was moving laterally, with all momentum residing in the true story of the House of David, rather than in Kasischke's variation of it.

The risk of an elliptical work like this one is that it will spiral in on itself, circling its own tail and never gaining any altitude. And indeed, *Eden Springs* started slow for me. Ultimately, though, Kasischke's poetic

and simple language propels the tale outward and caught me in its spell.

While suspense is built into this story of a suspicious grave and a charismatic leader, Eden Springs also evokes prophecy—of events foretold. Partly this is because of the news clippings and other detritus of real life that appear throughout the pages, conveying a sense of documentation and authority that plays against the imagined scenes.

This energy—the dissonance between prophecy and suspense—is the engine behind Eden Springs. The reader is positioned so that we both know what happened—that this utopian colony imploded and its believers are long gone—and at the same, we readers are hungry to know how it happened. With both wonder and knowingness, we navigate our way through this tale.

I found myself wanting more of Kasischke's original writing. This spare 150-page novella is full of white space, setting off the collage of its content, and in most ways, this works. Its disjointed nature reconciles with this moment in the story, when the House of David is on the brink of being unmoored. But I wish for a little more to hold on to. Maybe 30 more pages or so would give Kasischke the opportunity to spend more time with her evocative ensemble of characters, and in turn give us readers the chance to better acquaint ourselves with the substance behind this fantastical story.

Today, the shell of the House of David still sits in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Empty Victorian mansions, an abandoned zoo, a silent amusement park. Decay is overtaking this place that once served as a testament to decadence. Visitors today are the curious ones, the ones who are taken with the story, who see a crumbling ticket booth and hear the ghosts of the chattering, long-haired, white-clad believers from a century before. On this mythic tour, Kasischke is a worthy guide.

Aghostfriend says

Un petit Kasischke qui étonne par son approche frileuse d'un sujet pourtant si proche de l'univers de l'autrice. Par bribes la grâce de sa prose si caractéristique parvient néanmoins à distiller sa poésie vénéneuse, mélancolique et délicate. Sur un thème sensiblement identique la jeune Emma Cline était il y a quelques années bien plus convaincante avec "The Girls". Reste un talent évident d'écriture et un pouvoir d'évocation qu'insuffle chaque mot choisi avec la minutie d'une tisserande.

Kent District Library says

Join us for a friendly, informal discussion of some good books. This month's selection is "Eden Springs" by Laura Kasischke. For adults. Discussion will take place at Kent District Library's Rockford Branch on August 21, 2015 from 1:30-2:30 pm.

“This slim, powerful novella is set at the House of David, a utopian religious community in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Published by the Wayne State University Press and part of the Made in Michigan Writer's series, this strange but very real tale is interspersed with newspaper accounts and photographs from the era.”
—Mark at KDL's Krause Memorial Branch

Marnie says

an odd little story. I don't think anyone who doesn't know the history of the House of David would really be able to understand the plot, such that it is. well-written prose made it an enjoyable, quick read.

picked up the 2011 list of Michigan Notable Books at the library, and this one leapt off the page. having grown up near the House of David, I'm intrigued by anything written about it, fiction or otherwise.

Sandy D. says

This was a strange and poetic novella about a utopian religious community in the early 1900's in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Newspaper excerpts - and historic postcards of Eden Springs, the community's successful amusement park/zoo - add an intriguing foundation and counterpoint to a story of faith, seduction, and jealousy.

The "Israelite House of David" was famous for several things. Followers did not cut their hair (so the men had long hair and beards) or eat meat, they had a famous barnstorming baseball team, and their charismatic leader - "King Ben" - surrounded himself with beautiful young girls and music.

Amy says

The old photos and quotes compliment the sparse story, but due to the book's brevity there was little chance of getting sucked into life at the House of David.

Reading this reminded me of Brides of Eden, another work of fiction based on a real cult in Corvallis OR. I preferred Brides of Eden because of my familiarity with the location.

Adriane Devries says

A sumptuously written novella by Michigan author Laura Kasischke, Eden Springs gives the account of a religious cult formed 1903 in Benton Harbor, promising the ideal of eternal life in the body. The fervor of its leader, Benjamin Purnell, was a siren-call to followers from all over the world to abandon their worldly goods and move to the compound by the shores of Lake Michigan. Purporting no death to the body for all who truly believed, the beliefs of the group were first seen as an insult to the conservative ideals of its West Michigan neighbors. In the years that followed, the devotees eventually won over outsiders with their quiet, friendly ways, as well as with their lovely musical entertainment, baseball team, and amusement park. However, this new heaven on earth, with its artfully planned brick buildings and women dressed in white strolling its streets, soon revealed an inner darkness resulting in scandal, madness, and untimely death. Reporters and investigators would flock to the gates that would soon close forever, but there are still some alive who remember what happened there...

Mésange says

Une fiction qui est aussi un documentaire pour analyser l'histoire d'un gourou devenu le jouet de ses victimes.

Mary says

A novel based on a real religious commune/cult that had its heyday in the early 1900's in Benton Harbor Michigan - the House of David. Apparently there were some sexual shenanigans going on, even though the members were supposed to be celibate. This story includes those situations and a possible murder. Chapters are framed with images of real postcards from the commune and bits of newspaper and magazine articles about the legal trials in which they were involved. After reading this, I started looking into some non-fiction sources about the House of David - pretty interesting stuff.

Good Books Good Friends says

Encore un texte envoûtant de Laura Kasischke. Cependant, je l'ai vraiment trouvé trop court...

Tiffany says

This was a weird one. Completely unexpected. I had no idea how creepy, and unsettling this little book would be. This story follows a cult, known as the House of David, which harbors dark secrets, and is lead by a terrible leader, who takes advantage of many young women. The story is developed through multiple perspectives, which makes the story all the more compelling. It's interesting and engaging, with many beautifully written scenes.

Karen says

An interesting, quick read by a "Made in MI" author about a part of MI history I'd never heard about. In the early 1900's, Benjamin Purnell, opened the "House of David" and Eden Springs in Benton Harbor, MI. Basically, the church was a cult and Mr. Purnell saw himself as God, taking many liberties with young girls (15 and 16), as well as other husband's wives, all the while promising eternal life at a young & beautiful age. Eden Springs was an Amusement park/Amphitheater and how the "house of David" made its money. One of the young girls gets away and murder, drama and the eventual demise of the cult ensues. I found it interesting but not something I would mark as a "must read".

Carlos Sámano says

Kasischke presents a very particular story based on true facts, but the way she describes nature is poetical.

A must read if you like weird religion stuff or simply poetry or nature.

Laura says

This is a novella, so I felt like certain parts weren't as fleshed out as I'd have liked. Several of the characters were really interesting. My favorite was probably the teacher, who was so well-regarded and respected as a spinster school teacher that she was actually offended her landlord didn't leer at her. She basically said "screw it" and had sex with Benjamin in a field. I really wanted to know more about the girl who died, who apparently did nothing to draw the hatred of the others, except for catching Benjamin's eye.

Julia Grey says

Excellent historical fiction. Ms. Kasischke's way of unfolding what happened is impressive.
