

Book Review: The God of the Woods  
By Liz Moore

Author Liz Moore's "The God of the Woods" is a multi-layered, character-driven novel that will not only keep you appropriately engaged throughout, it's likely to keep you guessing as well.

The story opens in August 1975 at a camp high in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State. A 13-year-old girl has just gone missing, but this isn't your average 13-year old. Barbara is the daughter of Peter and Alice Van Laar, the family that owns the camp. And to compound the problem, her disappearance is almost 14 years to the day that her brother, nicknamed Bear, disappeared. His body has never been recovered.

What follows is a superbly constructed narrative that alternates between the present day search for Barbara, and the history of the camp – specifically, members of the Van Laar, McLellan, and Hewitt families, as well as a few counselors and members of law enforcement.

For example, Alice Van Laar has never recovered from the loss of her son Bear 14 years ago, and her life since has been littered with pills, alcohol, and time spent in rehab facilities. Barbara's disappearance virtually puts her over the edge. But we gradually learn as the layers of the mystery are slowly lifted the reasons why Alice's life has come completely unraveled.

The Van Laars are wealthy, as are the McLellans, and their reactions to Barbara's disappearance, and subsequent explanations (or lack thereof) reveal their self-interests in preserving the family name, image, and fortune. In other words, they're more than willing to lie to protect their family heritage – even at the expense of a cover up that tarnished the lives of an innocent man and his family.

Into this family dynamic where dysfunction runs strong beneath the surface comes Judy Luptack, 26, the newly minted first female criminal investigator in New York State. Driven to prove herself, as well as get out from under her own life's baggage, Luptack pushes forward in a male-dominated field to unravel both the current, and 14-year-old mystery.

Each chapter is labeled by a character's name, as well as a timeline, as Moore links together all the pieces to the puzzle, moving seamlessly from 1961, when Bear disappeared, to the present 1975 summer. Using this approach provides ample backstory to understand each character's history and role in the mystery. It also keeps you guessing throughout.

There are one or two minor loose ends, or aspects to the mystery, which might leave you – as they did me – saying, no, I don't believe that. Or, wouldn't someone have noticed?

But overall, "The God of the Woods" is an excellent novel about family values, redemption, and the reality that everything comes out in the wash.

I give it 4.5 out of 5 stars, and highly recommend it.