

Daredevils

Shawn Vestal

The go-for-broke spirit of legendary daredevil Evel Knievel is with two Mormon teenagers as they try to break out of their rigidly structured lives in this debut novel, set in the 1970s, from award-winning short-story writer Vestal (*Godforsaken Idaho*). After her father catches her sneaking out to meet her boyfriend, 15-year-old Loretta is hastily married off to Dean Harder, a polygamist whose strict adherence to Mormon doctrine turns off even his extended family outside of Arizona. Meanwhile, Dean's nephew Jason, facing another summer of soul-crushing work in the Idaho desert, longs to escape the drudgery of his small town, sneaking away with his grandfather to watch his idol Knievel try (and fail) to scale the Snake River Canyon. When Loretta's family moves next door to Jason's, the two conspire to split town in Jason's LeBaron with his best friend Boyd, in search of adventure (and Dean's gold, still in Arizona). Along the way, the three bright-eyed teens meet someone who looks and talks a lot like the great stunt performer himself. **VERDICT** Vestal's narrative is punctuated with imagined monologs from Knievel, raucous addresses that at first seem random but come by the thrilling conclusion to enrich the scope of this heartfelt and finely observed debut.

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