



What Girls Are Made Of

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

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When I was fourteen, my mother told me that there was no such thing as unconditional love. But I am not fourteen, and I am more than my mother's daughter. Nina is sixteen now and she ends her story with those lines. They return us to the novel's first page and her mother's disconcerting remark as she and Nina are folding laundry together. Mom will later deny she said any such thing, but Nina cannot forget her words. Thoughts about the conditions attached to different kinds of love preoccupy Nina throughout the novel.

In a Note which follows Nina's narrative, Elana Arnold explores the expectations society imposes upon girls. Arnold insists, "You don't owe anyone a slice of your soul. Not your parents. Not your friends. Not your teachers or your lovers or your enemies." The Note is a passionate five page essay which seems integral to the reading of the novel itself. Nina's story reads like a memoir drawing on the emotional impact of experiences which Arnold, now in her forties, encountered when as young as eleven through to a chilling moment in her first year at college. The novel, she tells us, was born not only of anger about cultural demands upon girls in her youth - some of which remain in our present; it was also driven by an awareness of her own complicity in conforming to what was required of her as a girl growing up in the States.

We follow Nina on several journeys into her memories, culminating in that strong affirmation that she has become "more than my mother's daughter". She revisits the love she shared with Seth, her first boyfriend; or, she now wonders, was it just the sex? She recalls in relentless detail the tsunami of orgasms triggered by a vibrator, the only present Seth ever gave her. Another memory takes her to Rome and Florence with her mother, where she is overwhelmed by paintings and sculptures, all created by men, depicting the sufferings - all inflicted by men - of virgin saints, climaxing in ecstasy fused with agony. Eros and Thanatos, her mother points out, sex and death. Back home in California, Nina is carrying out community service, a redemptive punishment for her treatment of one of her classmates; her action - involving a photograph posted on social media - was so repulsively cruel that she seems unable to tell us what she did until her tale is almost done. She enjoys the work she is required to do with homeless dogs in an animal shelter sited in a neighbourhood far less affluent than her own. The reward for the unconditional love some of these dogs have given is to be killed and rendered down for use in manufacturing lipstick. In another particularly powerful segment of her story, she records her moment by moment experience of abortion - kept secret from her parents and boyfriend. In fact, Nina shares very few conversations of any depth with males; from her perspective, those who impinge at all upon her life - Seth, her

mostly absent father, her English teacher ? remain unknowable.

Interspersed with these narratives, set in a different typeface, are short pieces of creative writing which contribute to a project for her Advanced Placement English class. They are unified in one way by Nina's attempts to employ magic realism; and in another through their oblique insights into the experiences she describes in other chapters. All this makes for a fragmented chronology which expects intelligent, reflective readers. They will find that the interplay of the story's diverse elements offers a powerful account of Nina's uneven, restless growth through two years of mid adolescence.

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