



Breathless

Books Reviewed:

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Editor's Choice:

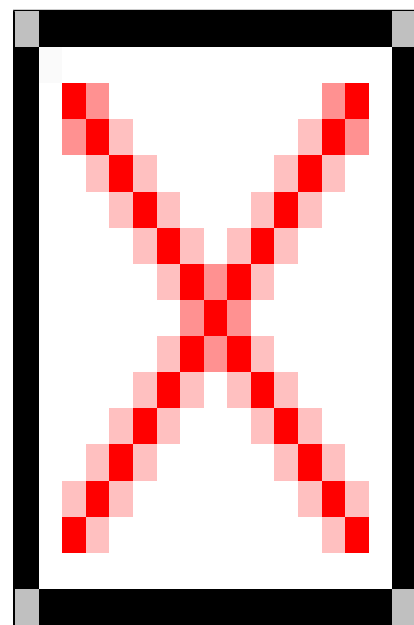
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4



Claude (as in Claudine) must write her story. For her own sake. One day, what is happening now will be the past, and everything ? thoughts, feelings, the amazing times, the empty times ? needs to be accurately recorded. In lines which precede her first chapter, she says to her lover, ?I don?t want to forget you. But most of all, I don?t want to forget me.? Jennifer Niven?s post-text ?Acknowledgements? (more about those shortly) conclude by urging her readers (?dear lovelies?) to ?... go out there and write your life?.

Perhaps adolescence, for many of us **BfK** readers, is now a foreign country; they do things differently since we lived there. Certainly, I never came across books charged with the explicit intensity of this one. But Claude?s relentless concentration on ?me? will, I would guess, coincide with the hungry preoccupations of many current YA readers, especially as Niven writes in such closely observed detail ? physical, mental, emotional ? about first encounters, first sex, first love, first joy, first despair.

Claude?s narrative is soon in acutely painful territory. She?s 18, living in smallish town Mary Grove, Ohio, with her

Mom and Dad. She's just graduating High School, she's bright, popular, secure ? a writer with ideas awaiting exploration. She's looking forward to sharing a road-trip with absolute best-ever friend Saz. There's a boy she's liked for a while from a distance ? he's awaiting exploration too. After the long summer, there's the brave new world of college. Then it all collapses. Dad leaves the family, smashing everything. Saz says she's fallen in love. With Yvonne. No road trip. Instead, Claude and Mom head off, along with the family cat, to a mosquito-plagued, sparsely populated island off the coast of Georgia, where Mom's family has old roots.

What happens there, in terms of dramatic incident, is not very much. There are low-key ?adventures?; walking the beaches, biking the beaten earth roads, watching loggerhead turtles, skinny-dipping, collecting shark teeth and shells, helping Mom sort documents in the island's tiny museum ? Mom is a successful writer herself. More important than any incident is the talk. Talk with the young people who help out in the island's small tourist business during the summer, talk with older people who love the island and know its power to show you new truths.

Talking, talking, talking. Most of the deeper talk is with ?Miah? ? Jeremiah Crew. He and Claude fall in love swiftly, effortlessly, absolutely. They begin the exploration of each other ? all the time aware of the days ticking by to the fixed dates when both must leave the island.

After the novel come those Acknowledgements. Niven reveals that when she was 18, her Dad suddenly left home and everything fell apart, ?as if the floor beneath me had disappeared? ? an image Claude has used repeatedly throughout the novel. Like Claude, Niven took off with her Mom for the summer. In 2018, she tells us, she too went to an island off Georgia ? planning to begin work on *Breathless*. Except she met ?the real-life Jeremiah Crew?; Claude's experiences in the book, Niven reports, very closely mirror her own. Now she and the original Jeremiah are married and continue ?to write our love story every day since.? The couple's good fortune is clearly to be celebrated, but this information perhaps belongs to social media or the author's Home Page. Its inclusion immediately after the narrative readers have only just read - and which, in a sense, they may well still be reading ? seems intrusive. If a reading of a novel is the result of the unique interplay of the text and an individual reader, then additional input of this kind from the author inevitably re-shapes that reading. The novel becomes, if you like, a fictionalised memoir.

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