

Novel probes suspense and sexuality

Teen finds her voice in 'Girl, Unframed'

Seattle author Deb Caletti has a reputation for her unflinching but compassionate probing of the teen psyche. She does it again in her new release, "Girl, Unframed."

Part coming-of-age novel and part thriller, this story begins in a foreboding way with a list of exhibits, as in a criminal trial. The voice of lead character Sydney Reilly says, "I had a bad feeling, even before I left home."

About to turn 16, Sydney is finishing up the school year in Seattle at a prestigious boarding school. But "home" is her grandma's house nearby. No-nonsense Edwina shows her love by cooking for her on weekends and buying underwear for her at Target.

While Sydney craves that stability, she is also experiencing unsettling new feelings. In the past few months, she's begun to realize that she's attracting the attention of guys; not just boys her own age but older men, too. The attention variously intrigues her and creeps her out. She's curious about desire and about being desirable.

Sydney is slated to spend the summer in California with her mom but she doesn't want to go. Particularly now, when she is trying to come into her own, Sydney dreads spending a summer being eclipsed by her mom.

Lila is a movie star who has achieved sex symbol status as a result of the roles she has played. She isn't, as Sydney notes, "exactly what you'd call maternal."

Sydney loves Lila but being her daughter is exhausting. Lila is preoccupied with shoring up both her looks and her celebrity. She goes through men like she goes through expensive sunglasses.

Lila's latest guy, Jake Antonetti, is a shady real estate developer with a yellow Lamborghini and a flashy house on Sea Cliff Drive in San Francisco.

That's where Lila is living now. As soon as Sydney arrives for her visit, she knows her instincts were right. The relationship between Jake and Lila is high-maintenance. Despite Lila's intentions to show her "Syd-Syd" a good time, the teen is often left to fend for herself.

This Week's Book

'Girl, Unframed' by Deb Caletti

Simon Pulse — 368 pp — \$18.99

Jake's German shepherd becomes Sydney's most reliable companion. Together, they explore the local beaches.

That's how Sydney meets Nicco. She has had crushes on boys before that were pretty much unrequited. But when Nicco comes along, everything clicks.

Caletti explores the confounding imperative of sexuality from various angles — from Sydney's blossoming relationship with Nicco; to Lila's dependence on her sex symbol status and her increasingly abusive relationship with Jake; to the local nudist beach where people are decidedly un-coy about their bodies.

This novel also probes our society's fraught attitude toward sex. Caletti pokes at sexual commodification and gendered double standards, along with the psychological trauma and generational impact of sexual abuse.

Bundled up in a whirlwind of movie deals and misty beaches and art world schemes, this story becomes increasingly harrowing.

Ultimately, "Girl, Unframed" is about the importance of heeding one's own inner voice.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.



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