



# The Animators

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## **The Animators** Kayla Rae Whitaker

In the male-dominated field of animation, Mel Vaught and Sharon Kisses are a dynamic duo, the friction of their differences driving them: Sharon, quietly ambitious but self-doubting; Mel, brash and unapologetic, always the life of the party. Best friends and artistic partners since the first week of college, where they bonded over their working-class roots and obvious talent, they spent their twenties ensconced in a gritty Brooklyn studio. Working, drinking, laughing. Drawing: Mel, to understand her tumultuous past, and Sharon, to lose herself altogether.

Now, after a decade of striving, the two are finally celebrating the release of their first full-length feature, which transforms Mel's difficult childhood into a provocative and visually daring work of art. The toast of the indie film scene, they stand at the cusp of making it big. But with their success come doubt and destruction, cracks in their relationship threatening the delicate balance of their partnership. Sharon begins to feel expendable, suspecting that the ever-more raucous Mel is the real artist. During a trip to Sharon's home state of Kentucky, the only other partner she has ever truly known—her troubled, charismatic childhood best friend, Teddy—reenters her life, and long-buried resentments rise to the surface, hastening a reckoning no one sees coming.

## **The Animators Details**

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# From Reader Review *The Animators* for online ebook

## Sam says

I'm a reader. An enthusiastic, passionate one for the most part, and trying to be a better one every day. There are lots of books I completely fall in love with and champion, saying how great a read it was. But every now and again, there's a book that so grabs me and speaks to me and says things that I feel may have sprung from my own brain, Athena style, and is so original and fun and heart-wrenching that not only do I love reading it, I wish I had written it. On some level, I feel like I wrote it, it's my baby, that's how connected I am to the characters, the narrative, the plot, the feel.

I wish I had written *The Animators*. (Apparently, so does Emma Donoghue, now that I've seen her blurb). I loved reading *The Animators*. And I'm so damn happy that Kayla Rae Whitaker let this wonderfully written story of creativity and friendship and love and grief and memory, of belonging and the family we choose and the family we're born with, of how we wrestle with our own stories and our places in the life stories of others, of all the intricacies and messiness and unexpected beauty and unpleasantness of life, spring forth from her head and wrestle and shape it into the glorious novel that is *The Animators*.

***'I spent years of my life trying to outrun myself,' Mel says. 'Trying to make enough noise to drown myself out. It makes me ashamed to admit this. But it's okay to let yourself catch up. It's okay if you work to catch up to the things that have happened to you. You do it for yourself. But also for the people around you. The people who deserve to experience you, undiluted, honest. Your genuine self, given to them... Your life is the people who fill it, and nothing's good without them.'***

The two things that make this book what it is are the characters, and the writing. Characters first. Sharon Kisses is our protagonist, and it's her head, first person perspective that we are immersed in throughout. There's no Sharon without Mel Vaught, her cartoonist partner that she first meets in Introduction to Sketch at Ballister, the college they're both attending in upstate New York. Both women have a passionate fire (Mel's bold and brash and raw, Sharon's a bit more secret and tempered by fear of failure and not being good enough), and both see Ballister and more importantly, art/drawing as a physical and emotional escape from their pasts and the worst parts of themselves. Kentucky and Florida lay in their rear-views, and their chance meet and then fall into friendship and mutual appreciation and excitement for each other's talent leads us quickly from Ballister to Brooklyn ten years later, successfully launching their first film, "Nashville Combat" which was mined and created from Mel's swamp-land-set childhood with her delinquent, criminal mother Kelly Kay. But just as they are primed for success, Mel is spiraling out of control with drugs and alcohol, while Sharon's insecurities and self-loathing are ratcheting up to new highs. But then tragedy strikes, and strikes again, and again, and Mel and Sharon are drawn back together, protecting and helping the other on an odyssey that takes both of them back to where they've come from and propels them forward to new creative and friendship highs and lows.

Mel and Sharon are both incredibly realized characters, dynamic yet damaged. And their friendship and work partnership is a beautiful thing: they bring out the best in each other while simultaneously forcing and helping confront and conquer the worst in each other, and feeding and nourishing their individual and collective creative processes. We get the early sketches of both in broad strokes, but Whitaker has an incredible way of revealing the depths of both characters. Mel is magnetic, stealing the scenes she's in whether as brave, compulsive Mel or caring, quieter, introspective Mel. She's a force of nature, and you can't help but be charmed by her almost immediately, just as Sharon was. Sharon, meanwhile, gains your interest and emotion through the read: though when we start with adult Sharon she's concerned about her relative

unimportance and lack of talent in comparison to Mel and feeling listless and unsatisfied (and we as the reader aren't yet that connected with her), Sharon's character grows rapidly throughout, and my love for her swelled accordingly. We're with Sharon and in her head through all of her suffering and her joys, and as she reveals her own humor, intelligence and anguish and starts to discover the gnawing creative spark all her own, we fully embrace Sharon as much as Mel. And their relationship is complicated, need and desire and resentment and fear and loneliness wrapped throughout their interactions, but their love for each other and their incredible ability to collaborate creatively, to understand each other's spark and force it into being, into work is rendered so well by Whitaker.

***A project always begins like a pimple on the back of the neck. You can't see it, but you can feel it, rising just under the surface. And it drives you crazy. It swells, gains definition, becomes visible. The bigger it gets, the more it presses into the back of your spine. The more it presses, the less you can focus on anything else. Working on it every day is just a way of scratching the itch until you've finished its business and it slowly starts to shrink back down.***

Whitaker's secondary and tertiary characters - their agent Donnie, Sharon's mother and sister Shauna, Caroline, Teddy, Brecky - are also all so well done, and I'd say especially Sharon's mother and sister, who transcend the stereotypical Appalachian "white trash" boxes Sharon sometimes tries to push them into (and a lesser writer than Whitaker might have done) and are scene-stealers all their own with depth and nuance.

I really won't get more into the plot: the friendship and complex love and shared but separate creative brains of Mel and Sharon drive it, but it's too hard to not spoil if I start talking in more detail. Suffice it to say the emotional highs and lows I took reading this, the genuine shock and sadness I felt, speak to my involvement in where this story went. And though I was taken aback and almost angry to continue after a final tragedy, the aftermath was entirely appropriate, well handled, and so authentic I felt the same eventual catharsis as the characters.

And the writing. Oh, it zips, zigs, zags, it's smart and funny and always managed to crack me right in the gut and knock the wind out of me with its heart and sad bits. Kayla Rae Whitaker's talent is so palpable and so present. The writing is as electric and alive as Mel is, and can be as subdued and questioning as Sharon can be. It jolted me along, top speed, full of sound, snap crackle pop: it's flashy without actually being flashy, just so good and so true to who these characters are that I was bookmarking and highlighting like a fiend, sometimes getting rocketed out of my enjoyment to marvel at a sentence, fully immerse myself in emotion. The closest comps I could think of to compare to in terms of sheer pleasure at how smart/fun/creative the writing is are *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Billy Lynn's *Long Halftime Walk*. Whitaker's writing is such that makes you remember why you love to read, and because it's in service to memorable, funny, heartbreakingly real characters like Mel and Sharon, and it's got that extra, semi-meta element in which we're talking about the birth of art and the creative process (in the least pretentious way possible) while Whitaker is creating this gem of a tale.

Others have said that this is a queer *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*: I don't know that I entirely agree with the overall comp due to their very, very different sensibilities. And I don't think all lovers of one will love the other. But I'm definitely in the intersection of the Venn diagram of these two titles. They share DNA with specific yet universal stories of friendship and love, of creativity, of overcoming and accepting one's past. They are both smart and well-written, and wear their emotions openly and will break your heart for how beautiful and meaningful the characters' ups and downs can be. I responded to both with fist pumping admiration and enthusiasm, my intellectual and emotional sides in harmonious agreement with love for what I was experiencing. And both vaulted into my all time favorites after the first read.

I wish I had written *The Animators*. I loved reading *The Animators*. And I'm so happy that this book exists and is due to be published in a little over a month, so I can read it again and again and again.

-received as ARC on edelweiss thanks to Random House

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## **Debbie says**

3.8, reluctantly rounded down

Oh boy, I was looking forward to a taste treat. Everyone who likes the same kind of candy bars I do raved about this book, which is about two edgy young cartoonists, Mel Vaught and Sharon Kisses, who team up and become famous and face huge obstacles along the way. When you run across a name like Sharon Kisses, how can you not be immediately enthralled and expecting the best?

### **What I thought while eating the first third of the candy bar:**

Chomp. Right away I ran into cartoon descriptions. Unless I'm vision impaired and can't see the cartoon, I don't want to hear a detailed description of it; it's work to try to visualize the cartoon, and it detracts from and holds up the plot. Then there were tidbits of pop culture references I didn't know—nothing like making you feel old and uncool and uninformed.

But I will add that there were frequent pockets of zesty flavor, moments of great insights which would temporarily make me a happier chomper.

There was a shocking event, all the more interesting because it was so unexpected. But the reaction to the event went on way too long I thought; it was monotonous and repetitive.

Darn, back to meh as I worked my way through to the middle.

### **What I thought when I got to the middle of the candy bar:**

Now we're cookin'. The candy bar was melting in my mouth and I will lie and say I was actually drooling just because I want to let you know I suddenly really loved this candy bar. I forgave or forgot the earlier mediocrity and smiled as I ingested pure heaven. This candy bar was worthy of 5 stars! It was just scrumptious and had so redeemed itself!

They were in Sharon's hometown with complicated and nuanced family and friend dynamics, wowsy dialogue, a terrific boyfriend, jealousies, passionate art and feelings, and a secret that when exposed, made a huge mess and a big loss. Chomp chomp chomp, yum.

### **What I thought while eating candy bar part 3:**

Then something big happens in the story. I was startled but still enjoying it all.

After the event, the story lost its momentum. There was suffering, and that was okay but it went on a little too long. Although it was realistic, I found myself uninterested in the slow recovery.

And it was during these late chomps that I realized Sharon was too passive for me. I often have trouble with too much passivity. (I had the same problem with *The Woman Upstairs*, another great story about two women and art. And I had the same complaint with *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, come to think of it.)

And finally, my schmaltsy side (you're probably surprised I have one, because I tend to deny its existence most of the time) did not like how the relationships panned out in the end.

The flavor in these last bites was like it was at the beginning--fine, but nothing to rave about. The sugar content plummeted and my taste buds no longer danced with glee.

### **Overall candy-bar analysis:**

Okay, I'm getting sick of my candy bar analogy. There were lots of good things I liked about this book. The language was very good, the dialogue great.

And call me weird, but I liked all the cussing. In my fantasy of cool artists, there is always a lot of f-words as modifiers.

The story highlights the passion and drive of artists, which made me get all serious and mull over the relationship of life to art. It made me ask questions like these: Is art or a relationship more important? Can you do justice to both art and a relationship at the same time--can they coexist and be good? And still in pondering mode but not related to art: in friendship versus an intimate love relationship, does the love relationship always win? And should it?

The dynamic between Sharon Kisses and Mel was edgy and authentic. At times heartwarming, at times heart-wrenching. They both come from poor, messed-up families. The two super cool characters have a super cool relationship, unique and intense. It's a really good buddy story where they have each other's back. Having each other's back is exquisite and rare in friendships.

Both Mel and Sharon are over-the-top hip, and they sort of put me into ga-ga land where I'm all artist worship-y. I liked how different the two were. Mel is the wild and crazy one; she's charismatic and comes up with some witty, bizarro jazzy phrases that made me laugh. She is complex and full of contradictions: she is both caring and heartless, strong and weak. And she's passionate and also druggy. Sharon is the quieter one—and she's the narrator with tremendous insights, which were original and plentiful and often made me stop and think.

I just went back to skim through my highlights and there are some humdingers. This is one smart, sophisticated book! Here are some spurts of delicious flavor, which will give you a taste of what I'm talking about (yeah, of course I'll share my candy bar, even if you don't ask me to):

*"She is a mosaic, all shards and details without context. Her profile: strong, small nose, but, yes, a weak chin. Enjoyed making cats dance."*

*"I'd forgotten the bleeding, limping endurance race that is arguing with my mother."*

*"It's that weird, transferable sort of shame when you feel the weight of embarrassment for someone else."*

*"She's one of those people who robs the room of all its oxygen."*

A great quote that shows self-awareness and is a good look at the process of creating art:

*“Mel likes the intimacy of what we do, of placing herself at the center of what we make. I love the work for the opposite reason: for the ability it gives me to abandon myself, to escape the husk of my body and fly off into the ether. I know a day of work has been really good when I have to look up from the board and recall who I am and what I’m doing.”*

One of my favorite thoughts, so I loved seeing it here:

*“Once you see something like that, you can’t unsee it.”* (Don’t we wish that wasn’t true!)

### **Final thoughts:**

I could put the book down (i.e., I could go to sleep at night), but I was always happy to pick it back up again. Of course, after looking through all the terrific insights I highlighted (and there were a lot), I definitely have 3-star remorse. But I must stick with my initial reaction, how I felt when I finished the book. **In good conscience I have to say it’s a 3.8.**

But geez, now I can't stop thinking of candy bars even though when I started this review I wasn't jonesin' for sugar. Let me go buy a Mounds bar, where the beginning, middle and end all make me drool. Or actually, the name Sharon Kisses sort of makes me want some Hershey's Kisses, which luckily have no beginning or end to slightly disappoint me.

Thanks to NetGalley for the advance copy.

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### **Angela M says**

There is so much contained in this story that I'm having a hard time knowing where to begin. It's the story of two young women who meet in college and form a partnership to make animated movies. Of course it's about so much more than their art and the artistic process, but their careers and calling in life, provide the backbone of their story. Yes, it's about art, the artist, how an artist's work may be shaped by her past. But for me the strength of the book was about trust, the depth of friendship that not everyone is fortunate to know and how these women struggled to survive deep seated wounds from their childhood experiences. Sharon Kisses (what a great name) born and raised in Kentucky, in a dysfunctional family, carries the burden of exposure at 9 years old to horrific things. Mel Vaught, raised in Florida by a drug addicted, prostitute mother who is in jail, has had a disturbing childhood to say the least. These two complex women join in a complex partnership where their art ultimately gives them a way to heal. As the story unfolds, we know of their failures, their successes, the hard times of their past and their present, one struggling with addiction, one being struck with health issues that seemed insurmountable. Yet their friendship remains strong.

As others have said in their reviews, this may not be everyone. The writing is gutsy, the story is gruesome at times but it's good. It reminded me in some ways of *A Little Life* and how that book made me feel - sad and emotionally drained, but yet elevated by the depth of friendship that I discovered.

I received an advanced copy of this from Random House Publishing Group - Random House through NetGalley.

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## Cheri says

!! NOW AVAILABLE !!

4.5 Stars

““The artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place: from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider’s web.” Pablo Picasso

Kayla Rae Whitaker’s debut novel is exceptionally good.

When Sharon Kisses and Mel Vaught are in the first moments of their friendship, it seems so fragile, so fraught with their individual tensions and angst. Inwardly, after checking out each other’s art work in class discussions, and a brief “what do you want to be when you grow up” type repartee, they realize they are two peas in a pod, two halves of the same sphere, each with their own uniqueness and talents. Yin and Yang. MFEO. At least in an art related way.

As this friendship grows, as they relax around the other, share more of themselves, their past, it becomes more a regular part of their life. As they graduate and move on with their post-college lives they form a more permanent bond, a business venture, so to speak. Still creating art, making a full-length video “Nashville Combat” based on Mel’s personal life when she was a young teen with a rather unconventional mother. She lays it all out there, for all the world to see what she endured. Not a pretty childhood.

Mel is a bit of a wild child, brash, living a bit on the edge herself. She attracts a lot of attention at events, at showings. She’s a bit compulsive and doesn’t like to be told what to do. She thrives on the attention of others, though, and is the star, at first, of all their events and showing. She survived her childhood in Florida’s swamplands by believing she could.

Sharon seems to withdraw even further into the shadows while Mel takes center stage. She’s more than happy if Mel answers all the questions about their work, and Mel eats it up. Still, if any interviews dare suggest that Sharon is just a lowly helper, or anything like, Mel is quick to defend her, acknowledging she couldn’t do without Sharon. Sharon has her own issues, public shyness aside. She lacks the courage and the belief in herself to accept who she is. Her family thinks poorly of her, that is, when they even bother to think of her at all. She survived her childhood in rural Kentucky by trying not to be noticed.

Down the road of years, living, surviving, they are each struggling with their own demons, and each other’s demons. Mel’s bingeing is out of control, and Sharon has no time to focus on her own problems when Mel’s problems are always taking Center Stage. And just when you think things will break apart... something happens to bring them closer together.

What I loved about these two flawed and fascinating characters was how real they were, how much I grew to really know them, and how I could feel their emotions, feel their moments of pain, sadness, love, sympathy, happiness and even anger. Devastation. It all felt as palpable as if they were telling me their own personal story. I love the settings, each of them, Kentucky, Louisiana, Florida, but most of all Brooklyn. Their loves and losses, frustrations and flirtations seemed authentic to their characters.

“And I knew just as surely, just as clearly, that life is not a work of art, and that the moment could not last.”  
– Norman Maclean



This is not a book for everyone, casual use of a long line of drugs, alcohol is frequently indulged in, or rather over-indulged in, so that's one cautionary note. For those who prefer to avoid books with "cursing" there's a significant amount.

Pub Date: 17 January 2017

Many thanks for the ARC provided by Random House, NetGalley, and author Kayla Rae Whitaker

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## **Justin says**

First off, lemme say thank you to NetGalley, Random House, and Kayla Rae Whitaker for the opportunity to read this book in advance. This was my first crack at using NetGalley, and I'm hoping it's the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

There are so many layers to *The Animators*, so much more going on in its pages, plenty of surprises that kept the pages turning for me. I also think that was a pretty good debut, and I really enjoyed Whitaker's writing style. She created some very memorable characters and settings. I actually cared about Mel and Sharon as they bounced around the county finding inspiration and creating new animations. The backdrop of small-town Kentucky was especially intriguing for me as a guy who grew up just south in the suburbs of Nashville. I could completely relate to Sharon's desire to get the heck outta there and hard it is to go back home at times. Some of her family felt like Whitaker drew inspiration from my own. Too close to home, man!

The animation stuff was a very unique way of storytelling, and those movie titles were fantastic! Nashville Combat is going to be my new band's name whenever I start a new band. We will do mostly folk rock with a subtle jazz influence. Anyway, using cartoons to dive deep into scenes from their life that were especially hard to deal with was really awesome to read about. I thought it was different without being too crazy. Plus, I enjoyed learning more about the process of a new art medium I knew very little about.

The beginning of the book was fascinating as it jumped quickly from college to fame to tragedy. The writing and dialogue was just so sharp and cool that I was really into it. So I don't know if the book was just too long or if it just lost its momentum for me, but I had a hard time through the middle and end of the book. Things started to feel really formulaic and way too convenient. For example, they track down an old friend later who just so happens to be in a similar line of work and no all about them. It just felt too forced. And then what happened from their just didn't seem believable. It just lost its steam, but it never completely derailed. It was fine.

As fun as the writing was, I also think it suffered from way too much sex and drugs and party stuff. I got the picture that Mel was way into that stuff, but I felt like I kept being reminded about what drugs were being used, drinking, sex, all that stuff just kinda got distracting after a while. And it seemed like the tragic event early on was just kinda pushed away and everything is cool again let's get back it no big deal whatever.

So it's fun. It's a lot of fun. I think we expect big things from Kayla Rae Whitaker down the line. Most people already love this book more than I do. And I still like it. I can't stress that enough. Sometimes three stars feels like a bad thing, but even with my criticisms of the book, I still had a lot of fun reading it. I think you will, too.

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## **Norma \* Traveling Sister says**

Traveling Sisters Read Review with Norma, Brenda, Lindsay, and PorshaJo

THE ANIMATORS by KAYLA RAE WHITAKER is an emotional, heartbreaking, profound, and a thought-provoking novel with a multi-layered storyline about a friendship that starts off with two small town flawed misfits that come to terms with their past through their animations and take their stories to the bright lights of New York City. This story crept up on us and blindsided and consumed us with how real this story was and had our emotions on a roller coaster ride throughout this entire book.

The story is told in the voice of our main character, Sharon about her personal life and her working relationship with her best friend Mel. They are a mismatched but a dynamic duo who come together as business partners and friends that creates an interesting and intense story as we were learning about their relationships through the extremely heartwarming and heartbreaking scenes. They both share a passion for their work and bring their lives into their work as we see the differences between these two characters.

Sharon is quiet, ambitious, and self doubting where Mel is brash, interesting, complex, and life of the party with a rock star personality but then we see more of a gentle side to her when it comes to her relationship with Sharon.

KAYLA RAE WHITAKER delivers a vivid and well-written read here with an artistic flare to her writing style that really made us stop and think about all the underlying messages which at times was quite the heavy read. The characters were complex, well-developed and KAYLA RAE WHITAKER does a fantastic job with the dynamics between Mel and Sharon. We could really feel the tender, unique, and the strength of their friendship through their bond and their love that they had for one another.

This book wasn't exactly what we were expecting but we all thoroughly enjoyed it. It had our emotions all over the place as some parts were quite funny but mostly it was moving and sad and really affected us. THE ANIMATORS is a story with characters that will stay with us for a very long time. Would recommend!

All our Traveling Sisters Reviews can be found on our blog:  
<http://www.twogirlslostinacouleereadi...>

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## **Annet says**

I need to recover from this one.... a story with terrible lows, another book I had to stop reading and take a break from. But what a unique out of the box story and what a talented debut. About the intense and heartbreaking friendship of two girls, who produce animations... The animators: Mel and Sharon. Who live an unconventional life, especially Mel with a sort of self-destructive character. Can't do anything else but give it five stars. Out of this world. I really have to organize my thoughts on this one. A five star rating for a story I did not even like at times because of the sometimes sad and shocking content.... Great book, exceptional. Recommended for those who can take a story like this.

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## Iris P says

The Animators: A Novel

*I received a free advance e-copy of this book from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review, thank you!*

★★★★ 4 ½ Convincing Stars!

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Whenever artists inject personal history into their work, whether through a novel, a stand up comedy routine, or a movie, I often wonder what kind of impact if any, that decision has had in their family dynamic.

This is one of the undercurrent themes of this novel: Who owns the rights to the "material" your life has produced? Here is how author Anne Lamott answers this question:

***"If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better. You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories ."***

And so, that's exactly what Mel Vaughn and Sharon Kisses, through the exciting medium of animation, chose to do. At its core, *The Animators* revolves around the intense emotional journey two young women embark on as they probe, explore and use the narratives of their very dysfunctional childhoods, while striving to master their craft.

Mel and Sharon met during their very first week at Ballister, a \$50k per year liberal arts college in upstate New York. Originally from a rural part of Kentucky, Sharon could only afford attending the school's prestigious visual arts program after receiving the "*Appalachian Kid scholarship*". Still, if there's someone who has been handed a worse hand in life than Sharon, that's Mel. She grew up in a small town in Central Florida, her mother is in prison after being indicted on several criminal charges, including prostitution.

The new friends shortly learn that their compatibility goes beyond having a similar background, even more significant, is their mutual enthusiasm for classic and obscure cartoons, as well as a shared passion for visual animation.

Wikipedia defines "*Yin and yang*" as "***complementary (rather than opposing) forces that interact to form a dynamic system in which the whole is greater than the assembled parts.***"

By that definition, Mel and Sharon's partnership is the human embodiment of yin an yang. They feed off and complement each other. Whereas Mel is gay, brilliant, and reckless, Sharon is straight, quiet and reliable. And thought, it isn't always obvious, Sharon feels insecure about her skills, especially as they measure against those of her overconfident partner.

Fast forward ten years, Mel and Sharon have become well known entities within the indie film scene of cartoon animation. They have spent their 20's in a dusty studio in Brooklyn, working in their first full-length feature film called *Nashville Combat* . The success of the picture, which is based on Mel's mother's life, has all but secured their immediate future, as they have been awarded a substantial grant to finance their next project.

The way Sharon and Mel approach animation is different: while Mel enjoys being at the center of the work they produce, Sharon is more comfortable behind the scenes. To her this is a means to escape reality, is what she calls "*discorporation*". On this point Sharon reflects:

"In her weird , exhibitionist's way, Mel likes the intimacy of what we do, of placing herself at the center of what we make. I love the work for the opposite reason: for the ability it gives me to abandon myself, to escape the husk of my body and fly off into the ether. I know a day of work has been really good when I have to look up from the board and recall who I am and what I am doing."

Just as they are beginning to enjoy their success, two life-altering events derailed their plans and ultimately mark a turning point and serve as catalyst for what follows.

Meanwhile, after Mel discovers a childhood trauma that Sharon has been hiding from her for years, they decide to visit her estranged family in Kentucky.

Eventually, the young duo produce a second autobiographical film called *Irrefutable Love* , this time based on Sharon's very disturbing childhood experiences. Which bring us back to the issue of whether artists should subscribe to some ethical boundaries, especially if the material they are using might affect the lives of others. As it turns out, Sharon faces this dilemma and, as a consequence of her decision, loses someone very close to her.

*The Animators* was a wild ride that took me from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other. There was also enough alcohol, sex, swearing, smoking and drug abuse to last me for the next few dozen books. And then there's also the fact that the novel's ending landed like a gut punch in my solar plexus.

Through it all, Mel and Sharon remain fiercely loyal and deeply protective of each other. It may be that Whitaker left the nature of their relationship intentionally ambiguous, but there's no doubt that the connection between these two characters pushes the boundaries of what is considered a conventional friendship. This might be the closest you can get to another human being before crossing into romantic territory.

Ultimately thought, Sharon and Mel's friendship is sealed by a more altruistic passion: the sense of redemption and catharsis they achieve as collaborators in their craft. Turning their lives into art form, and the grief they experienced in the process, might actually symbolize the highest level of intimacy. In that sense, this really is a love story.

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## **Andrew Smith says**

At school I sat next to a friend who drew all the time. He was so gifted; he'd end up with mini cartoon figures all over his books. And calligraphy too – he wrote in this artistic flowing style. I'd never seen anything like it before. I asked him once where he learned how to do this stuff. He just shrugged and looked at me as if to say 'I don't know; I just do it'. I was always envious of this ability, it was something he had in spades and I had none of at all.

Sharon and Mel can draw. They meet at a privileged arts college in upstate New York. Two girls from down south who'd had less than privileged upbringings. Sharon has escaped her small town thanks to a scholarship

and she's drawn to the full-on Mel, with her loud personality and precocious drawing skills. One night they watch cartoons together and share stories – it's instant, they're a team.

In the early pages of this book I was scared that I'd stumbled into a chic-lit romp of the type I studiously try to avoid. I wasn't instantly taken with Mel – an aggressive and boorish lesbian who's depiction felt overblown to me – and I thought Sharon a little dull. In this warm-up section of the book I almost quit, ready to seek out something more interesting, more challenging. We'd skipped most of the college years and the girls were finding their way in the commercial film making world, as (of course) animators. And then suddenly the mood changed; an event occurred – unexpected, shocking. I was instantly thrust into a deeper, more complex tale. Then a revelation, just as surprising and equally as shocking. Ok, this was now a dark story, very dark indeed. I'd badly miscalculated the author's intentions here. I was also seriously hooked.

It's a book that kept me on my toes – I was surprised by every twist and turn, I didn't see any of them coming. And keep in mind this is not a mystery novel, it's a book about relationships and what people make of their lives. It's about families and secrets and how people use what they've got - what they were born with and what they develop along the way – to move forward. Sometimes they stumble and sometimes they lurch. At times it's all so easy but almost as often it's almost too hard to bear.

I grew to love Mel. I'd seriously misjudged her early on. I'm still making up my mind about Sharon. Mel was the leader and Sharon the follower... I think. It's complex. Their intertwined stories are fascinating and funny and sad. I really enjoyed the road trip element to the story and most of all I adored Sharon's family. It's all really a rich and satisfying mix.

There's only one point where I thought an action taken (or rather not taken) jarred a little. This set me wondering a bit: could this really happen, could this action really be avoided? (view spoiler) But then maybe it could. This aside, I felt the story flowed brilliantly. I know I've enjoyed a book when I start checking how many pages are left, dreading having to finish it. As I eked out the last few pages I knew this book would stay with me for a long time.

My sincere thanks to Quarterly Literary Box for providing a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. It's particularly noteworthy that the lead book in each box comes with author notes appended liberally throughout, for added interest and insight.

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## **PorshaJo says**

I'm sure you have heard the saying 'Don't judge a book by it's cover'....and that statement applies 100% to this book. To be honest, I figured it was all about cartooning, graphics arts, and drawing and I was not interested in that. But I read a few GR friends reviews who loved this one and I added it to my list. Then Norma mentioned this one for a Traveling Sisters read and I was in. And I loved it! I was so happy to read this one with Norma, Brenda, and Lindsay.

The Animators is about real life, real people. This is what happens. Seriously, one of the better books on fully developed characters that I have read in a long time. The story is told from the point of view of Sharon Kisses (come on, you know you love that name) - half of this powerful team. The other half, Mel Vaught. Seriously, these two, the ying and the yang. Sharon is quiet, reserved, but determined, the finisher of the two.

Mel is wild, in your face, but driven, the starter of the two. But both of them can party with the best of them. You can't help but be drawn towards Mel. She exudes life and lives it to the fullest. You learn of how they meet in college, form a friendship, and become partners in developing animated movies about life. Specifically, their lives. Yeah, there is talk about the process of animation and drawing, but it's not over the top. It's central to the story. Both of the girls have had rough early lives and it impacts their lives today and makes them who they are. And you see this in their animated movies.

This one really took me by surprise. I can't believe how much I really liked it. It was funny, but man was it sad. I'm not gonna lie, I really had to choke back tears in the end. It's heartwarming and it's real. It's the story of friendship, real true friendship. I read it slow, so not to miss anything. I know this one will end up in my favorites of the year. But, I'm not sure that I have done this book justice. For an amazing review, check out the Norma's review and the Traveling Sisters at:

<https://twogirlslostinacouleereading.wordpress.com>

A wonderful read and one that will stick with me for some time. If anyone were to ask me, 'what book should I read', I would say *The Animators*. Just go into it with an open mind and savor every moment of it.

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## **Meredith says**

I just finished *The Animators*, and I all can say is that I am emotional mess. I got so attached to the characters in this book that I am having a hard time letting go.

Sharon Kisses (yes, Kisses is her last name) has always felt like an outsider. Growing up in a small town in the Appalachians in Kentucky, artistic Sharon does not fit in with her family. When she receives a scholarship to prestigious Ballister College, she sees it as her chance to escape and pursue her artistic abilities. Ballister is where she meets Mel Vaught. Mel possess a level of charisma that causes people to flock to her. Sharon is beyond shocked when Mel praises her artwork. The two develop a close friendship as they bond over drawing, art, music, and their less than elite backgrounds.

Fast forward 10 years later-- Sharon and Mel have become business partners, drawing cartoons. They are eventually rewarded when they win a prestigious grant for a film based on Mel's life. This is when Sharon begins to question her role in their partnership. She wonders if Mel is the real talent and she is just riding on Mel's coattails. Their friendship becomes strained until a traumatic incident pushes them together, reaffirming their friendship and fueling their artistic talents.

Throughout the novel, people blow through Mel and Sharon's lives: friends, lovers, family members, but what remains constant is Sharon and Mel's friendship. The two of them are family, who stand by one another through the good and the bad.

*The Animators* is multi-layered. The characters are developed and complex. Thanks to Whitaker's writing, I could picture Mel and Sharon and I felt like I knew them. There is a ton of information on the animation process, which went a little over my head, but did not detract from the reading experience. I can't believe this is Whitaker's first novel—I am impressed and will definitely be on the lookout for her work in the future.

I received a copy of this book from NetGalley and the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

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## Larry H says

I'd rate this between 4 and 4.5 stars.

"From age eighteen on, I had a partner, a kindred spirit. I had a friend. Someone bound and determined to keep me from the worst in myself."

Sharon Kisses leaves her rural Kentucky home to be a scholarship student in visual arts at a liberal arts college in upstate New York. A few weeks into one of her art classes, she meets Mel Vaught—brash, unabashedly talented and ambitious, and fighting the demons of her own childhood amidst the swamps of Florida. In many ways, Mel is everything Sharon wishes she could be. The two quickly bond over family problems, their shared love of classic cartoons and cult-classic animation, and their desire to shake up the world with their work.

Ten years later, Sharon and Mel are a renowned, award-winning duo of animators. Their first full-length movie, *Nashville Combat*, a stylized look at Mel's dysfunctional childhood, has turned the entertainment world on its ear, and Mel's unfiltered, often drug- and/or alcohol-fueled behavior, has gained the team even more notoriety. Yet as they begin their publicity tour for the movie, and prepare to accept a major arts grant to support their work, their partnership is starting to fray.

Mel's behavior is getting more and more out of control, and a personal tragedy, which causes her to contemplate using her childhood as fodder for entertainment isn't helping. Sharon is tired of being the responsible one, the one who keeps the stories on track, the one who ensures Mel shows up when and where she's supposed to. She starts to wonder if she is as talented as Mel, or if she's destined to spend her career a step or two behind. Yet when an unexpected emergency occurs, the strength of their friendship and their partnership is truly tested, and both must demonstrate their love for, and reliance upon, one another, and decide whether their work and their relationship are worth fighting for.

*The Animators* is the story of two people drawn together by talent and passion, and the toll that being a creative genius often takes on a person. It's the story of how we try to hide from the problems and questions that nag at us, and how burying them in our work can have mixed results, professionally and emotionally. It's also the story of the sacrifices people make for their work, and whether you have the right to use your memories as creative fodder if they're shared by others. But at its heart, this is the story of a professional and personal partnership, and all of the joy, pain, and emotional anguish that comes with it.

I really enjoyed this book. Mel is a fascinating, flawed character, and you can clearly see why Sharon was so drawn to her, as well as the price Mel paid for her talent. Sharon is more passive (and some of her actions were really frustrating) but she, too, was an interesting character. I thought this book raised a lot of interesting questions, and it definitely shed more light on the world of animation and cartoons for me. I only wish I could have seen some of the work that was described in the book!

It's hard to believe that this is Kayla Rae Whitaker's debut novel. Her writing is tremendously self-assured, and she really drew me into her story very quickly. I thought at times it moved a little slower than I would have liked, but I really enjoyed the dynamics of these characters, and was sad when the book ended. I really look forward to seeing where Whitaker's career takes her, because she has a true talent. This would make a really interesting movie, actually.

NetGalley and Random House provided me an advance copy of the book in exchange for an unbiased review. Thanks for making this available!

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo....>

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### **Diane S ? says**

I have never been a comic book lover, not in the past and not now. Graphic novels? Have only ever read one. Animation? Can take it or leave it. So why did I ever pick up, this book? Goodreads, a few strong reviews from friends I trust and it sounded different. Took a chance that turned out to be a big win, win.

Tow friends from art school, a unique partnership, Sharon Kisses and Mel Vaughn, Avant garde, B movies, a graphic animated story of Mel's life. These girls both have difficult back stories, Mel from Florida, Sharon from a small town in Kentucky. Tragedies in their past, issues to overcome the best they can.

Sharon Kisses is our narrator, just love both their names. This book..... it is heartwarming, heartbreaking, funny, sad, drugs, alcohol, creative juices, a unique friendship, obstacles to overcome, in your face, leaving you with nowhere to hide. It turned me inside out and upside down. It is grungy, gritty, brimming with life. Passion for art and raw reality. It is all the things we read fiction for and more. It is a story with characters you will think about long after you finish.

A first novel? Incredibly hard to believe, the talent of this author is amazing. Can't wait to see what she does next. My first five star read of the New Year. Who knew?

ARC from Netgalley.  
Publishes January 31st.

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### **Suzanne Leopold says**

Melody and Sharon build a strong friendship after meeting in college. They both grew up in dysfunctional families lacking emotional support. After graduation they developed a successful partnership working as film animators. Mel is outspoken and bold while Sharon is reserved and cautious.

Ten years later in New York City their first full length feature is an award winner. The film focuses on Mel's teen years growing up in Florida. After the movie release, they receive a prestigious grant giving them freedom for their next film. While embarking on a press event in Florida a crisis occurs which redefines their friendship and future partnership.

Narrated in Sharon's voice, this is a book about two complex individuals and their personal journeys. The book is humorous and heartbreaking at the same time, making it a wonderful read. I loved the gritty and realistic feel from this author's debut novel.

1 copy being given away on my blog until 2/16 <https://www.facebook.com/suzyapproved...>

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## Elyse says

BOOKS are GREAT THIS YEAR!!! Viva-la-melty! Many wonderful debut novels... and \*Kayla Rae Whitaker\* deserves to be on the list with the great new authors to read!!

If you read this book quickly - it stays with you -it's a joy ride. If you read it slow... ---back up ---and cherish the nitty-gritty- "Frotched" and "Hee Haw" moments, it's a legitimate hangover feeling ..... "Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey".

Mel Vaught and Sharon Kisses meet in a College art class...then had drinks at a bar together with other students. Mel told Sharon she wanted to be a cartoonist..."yeah, animate". "What else is there man?" Sharon just felt happy that Mel had chosen her to talk with. Plus, Mel was the first person who looked at Sharon seriously after looking at her sketch back, and said, "You'd be really good.".....  
.....but there was a moment when you had a hunch this friendship was not going to be a fly-by passing in the night.

The girls watched a VHS tape ( remember those?) On the screen is a sinister, heavy-eyed duck, a methy Daffy, wearing a trench coat. They were watching "Dirty Duck. 1974, Offshoot of that whole 'Fritz the Cat' San Francisco alt-coming thing. R. Crumb.

Mel had stolen the tape from one of her mom's boyfriends. To think, Mel's love of drawing 'started' with cartoon fucking. --

The night include cigarettes and dig dongs. Sharon didn't know if it was the cartoons that night themselves, or watching them with Mel, but it was the closest she had ever felt of knowing what SHE wanted from life. That was the night Sharon quietly indebted herself to Mel forever. RIGHT HERE ....in the novel I STOPPED....

I thought of times in my life where I 'jumped' into friendships quickly...making quick decisions about 'how great' the person is. I spent time - just looking at patterns - history - 'trying' to be objective. I'm left with the question -- so? what's 'really' the big risk of jumping into a friendship too quickly? It's not the same as a marriage - so why do the risks feel as threatening? Or do they?

Moving on.....much to contemplate on in this novel...

Ten years later, Mel and Sharon, having collaborated together on their own 'DirtyDucky' creative comic-tragic-wacky-work....begin to get noticed --- grant scholarship included. They made a full length called 'Nashville Combat', a story about Mel when she was 13 years old, living in Florida....and her mother who went to prison.

During the after party, with lots of friends ( mostly following Mel around) and lots of drinking, ...was when the girls differences in character started to be really noticeable.... to the point of causing some serious problems.

Mel and Sharon were two very different type of people with very different personalities.

Sharon doesn't trust herself to be funny like Mel...she can't go 'off script'....whereas Mel is brash, a little arrogant, definitely more self confident. Yet, Sharon and Mel are a good balance - 'sometimes'.. Sharon either underestimates or downplays her own talent or just feels more comfortable taking a back seat. She is the practical responsible one of the two.

Their partnership does being to split-at-the-seams.

Tragedy + tragedy...for both girls!! The problems they bump up against are problems that have been there a long time.

Animation-- success-diving into work -- using emotional trauma in an artists work often creates masters. We

can name many trouble talented artists....

but....it's when those artists take time to confront their past - 'face it' - begin to deal with it...then the possibility to use those past traumas - at cause- allows the art to be more powerful without being self-destructive.

This would make an excellent book club choice. The author created a compelling story centered around Mel and Sharon. Their personal friendship and professional friendship opens up a wide range of themes to discuss.

There is a lot of heart in this story. FUNNY laugh out loud moments and very painful moments. It's also the type of book...that might have a reader reminiscing about their own relationships.

I must also add, it was very cool that our two leading women were animation artists!

Thank You Random House, NetGalley, and Kayla Rae Whitaker --congrats on your first novel!!! Wonderful

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## **karen says**

this is a straight-up *monster* of a book.

it's like one of those carnivorous plants that secretes a delicious sticky nectar to lure in its prey which, once adhered, can be feasted upon at the plant's leisure. it's one of the most immersive books i've read in a long time, and i was utterly ensnared, but while i was devouring the pages, i could feel the story getting under my skin and digging into my brain where it's going to stay for a long time.

i'd heard good things about this debut through the grapevine, but i didn't know much about its content other than the wispy buzzwords of female friendship, art and the creative process, lesbian themes... and i feel so fortunate that i went into it more or less blind, because there are big, narrative-redirecting events here, and every one of them caught me off guard and made me do that shocked-pause thing that is the closest i get to experiencing an emotional response to a book. this is going to be a vague review, so i don't take any of those discoveries away from other readers.

it's a gutsy book, very unladylike in all the ways i appreciate. it's kind of like the blowsy, dissipated older sister of Fangirl. these are characters who stick with you, as layered and complex as any 'real' women you know, and the trajectory of their relationship as friends and (business) partners is exquisite. it's less of a novel and more of a *presentation*, where everything is all splayed out under unflattering lighting - the reader is exposed to an intense and frequently uncomfortable look at these ambitious, driven, occasionally cruel, characters, and the way the dark corners of their lives are used to fuel their psychological-striptease brand of visual art. it's all the good stuff i crave: the white trash diaspora, family secrets, childhood trauma, bad romantic decisions, rage, fame and the negative side of celebrity (or notoriety), rivalry, self-doubt, co-

dependence, self-destruction, and the fluctuations of a tremendously intense relationship over time.

it's so damn *assured* for a debut, so confident, and while the pacing is a little hit-or-miss, and it's maybe a little overpacked for its own good, for the most part, this is an emotionally explosive read that makes me want more more more and now now now from this author.

oh, and the annotations in this one were fantastic! i will post a couple of photos later when i get a second.

here are two of them. they're cute and funny and really give you a sense of her personality. and her awesome taste in film.

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oh my god - i just got my SECOND quarterly literary fiction box from pagehabit, and it is amazing! somehow, against impossible odds, both boxes have had three books that i have neither read nor own yet, but that i still really really want to read. book angels do exist!

however, the physical box this time out is too small for maggie to sleep in, and she is displeased. displeased, but still determined to get in there.

incidentally, you can see that last box they sent in the upper-left hand corner, which maggie still sleeps in. but not this time, cat. not this time.

come to my blog!

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**Lindsay - Traveling Sister says**

3.5 stars

This was a powerful and emotional book that revolves around the power of true friendship. It completely took me by surprise a few times - I wasn't expecting the emotion and intensity it held over me. The writing is excellent, but the storyline gets dark and depressing. The plot took turns that caught me off guard and I read

things I really wish I could erase from my mind, however, they fit well into the tale. I will warn readers that there are some highly sensitive scenes involving child abuse that were extremely hard for me to read. This is a novel I would suggest reading only when you are in the mood for a darker, more serious reading experience.

My enjoyment factor shifted throughout the book - started off good, then got great, but then fell flat as the story seemed to drag on and lost its spark for me. I felt the ending continued on a little too long.

It was a pleasure to read this along with my Traveling Sisters Brenda, Norma and PorshaJo! This novel sparked some deep thoughts and discussions.

To find our full Traveling Sister Read Review, please visit Brenda and Norma's fabulous blog at:

<https://twogirlslostinacouleereading....>

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### **Jennifer Masterson says**

I'm late to the party but I'm so happy that I went! This book was awesome! I mean so great! Sharon Kisses, yes Kisses, and Mel Vaught made me laugh and they made me cry! This book did what every reader is looking for. It. Made. Me. Feel! All the feels!!!

I listened to the audio version. Looking for a good audiobook? This is a hot one! Alex McKenna brilliantly narrated this novel! When she read the voices of Sharon's friends and family in Kentucky she had me laughing so hard I was rolling on the floor, especially the voice of her mother! Just fantastic!

I must have tried over a dozen books before I tried this one. I've been in and out of a rut. This book grabbed me from the very beginning and never let go.

I still can't believe this is a debut. Highly highly recommended!!!

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### **Esil says**

4 high stars. The Animators is one of those big novels full of things I love:

-The narrative is original. For a long time, I really had no idea where the story was taking me, but I kept being impressed by the layers of complexity that were added as the story took a few unexpected turns.

-The setting is great. The author is from Kentucky and has lived in New York, and she integrates both settings really well into the story.

-The characters are complex. The two main characters -- Sharon and Mel -- work as a team making animation films. They both have complicated family backgrounds. Their films are gusty and personal. Their personal relationship and the way they work together is visceral and messy. I wouldn't pick Sharon and Mel as friends, but I really got into them as characters.

-The author touches on some good questions about life and art, and what it means to tell someone else's story through art.

-The writing was very readable, and occasionally soared.

The Animators won't work for readers who shy away from gritty, dark topics. But I sure think it is an impressive weighty debut novel. Whitaker has me hooked for her next book. Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

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## Marie says

Breathtaking, stunning debut novel! It is amazing! It is tragic, heartfelt, tender and brazen all at the same time. I absolutely loved this! I loved the journey it took me on. I loved that I had no idea where this book was headed, but went along for a wild ride that had me laughing and crying. There were so many areas of gray and missing pieces of information that I was itching to learn more about along the journey. These holes were so often filled in just when you thought you might not get the answers. However, the missing pieces weren't ever what was expected, never cliched. This book is filled with tragedy, horrors, sadness, but also with redemption, hope and love.

The novel begins in art class with Mel and Sharon, two young women not quite fitting the usual mold at the upstate college they attend. They are poorer, have experienced more hurt and pain, and seem to have no one. That is, until they find each other. They bond over old cartoons including Dirty Duck, Ren and Stimpy, Clutch Cargo, Fritz the Cat, and Heavy Traffic. They begin working together at school and after graduation spending long days and nights working on their first movie together based on Mel's mother, who was a drug-addicted prostitute. They are both artists who have triangulated their futures together through their art. Ten years later they are experiencing the success of their first film. Mel is bold, confident, the life of the party. Sharon is reserved, holding back, the more practical of the two. Together they have become a great team. They are best friends and work partners. However, their friendship is tested by addiction, jealousy, and medical illness.

It is through their friendship with each other that they begin to rebuild themselves. *"She was the first person to see me as I had always wanted to be seen. It was enough to indebt me to her forever."* Their relationship is close, nurturing, subject to role reversals and also anger.

It is through their art that they come to terms with their pasts, redeeming themselves through a process of catharsis. Kayla Rae Whitaker beautifully describes how much they pour themselves into their work, how it is transformative, healing, and full of love. It changes the way they feel about themselves, their childhoods, and in Sharon's case it changes her relationship with her mother.

I loved the writing, the build-up of tensions, the breaking down of tensions. I loved the power of the encounters between Sharon and her family. It is amazing how much was conveyed with so little said, how tone and inaction spoke so loudly between them. The characters are so vividly and fully developed, the relationships incredibly dynamic, and the storyline itself is unique, bold and exhilarating.

This book is incredible. It has so much depth, energy, grit. I highly recommend this to everyone! This will make an excellent book club choice.

Thank you to net galley and the publisher for an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review!

For discussion questions, please see <http://www.book-chatter.com/?p=959>.

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