



# Family

*Micol Ostow*

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## Family Micol Ostow

*i have always been broken.*

*i could have. died.*

*and maybe it would have been better if i had.*

It is a day like any other when seventeen-year-old Melinda Jensen hits the road for San Francisco, leaving behind her fractured home life and a constant assault on her self-esteem. Henry is the handsome, charismatic man who comes upon her, collapsed on a park bench, and offers love, a bright new consciousness, and—best of all—a family. One that will embrace her and give her love. Because family is what Mel has never really had. And this new family, Henry’s family, shares everything. They share the chores, their bodies, and their beliefs. And if Mel truly wants to belong, she will share in everything they do. No matter what the family does, or how far they go.

Told in episodic verse, *family* is a fictionalized exploration of cult dynamics, loosely based on the Manson Family murders of 1969. It is an unflinching look at people who are born broken, and the lengths they’ll go to make themselves “whole” again.

## Family Details

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## From Reader Review Family for online ebook

### ERIN SCHMIDT says

Several years ago I went to a performance of MacBeth at my alma mater, an all-women's college. The cast was composed entirely of women. As the director noted in the program, this was a deliberate choice, harking back to the Celtic matriarchal tradition, in which women used storytelling to pass on the culture's morals and values.

I imagine Family by Micol Ostow being read by a chorus of women for just such a purpose.

If you're younger than me, you may have read a book called Out Of The Dust, by Karen Hesse, in school. It's a novel in episodic verse, a series of linked poems that tell the story of a teenager named Billie Joe living through the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Family is written in a similar style.

Like Billie Joe, the 17-year-old narrator of Family is a young woman. Her name is Mel. Mel is one of those tragic young adult characters, the likes of which inspired Meghan Cox Gurdon to write her controversial Wall Street Journal essay "Darkness Too Visible." Mel lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, whom Mel calls Uncle Jack. "Uncle" Jack is an alcoholic who sexually abuses Mel. Mel's mother knows about the abuse and does nothing. In Mel's mind, her mother offers her up as a sacrifice.

Mel decides to run away from home. Now the historical context becomes important: the book is set in the late 1960s, the era of free love, hippies, beautiful people and Haight-Ashbury. With the vague sense that she'll be able to survive there, Mel heads for San Francisco. Instead of a utopia, she finds a park bench, where Mel sits down and is overcome with inertia. She doesn't have a clue what to do or how to take care of herself.

Along comes Henry. Henry is loosely based on Charles Manson, and as Mel is drawn into his inner circle there is a terrible sense of foreboding. Younger readers may not be aware of the historical events on which the book is based, but will probably not find them terribly shocking compared to crimes that routinely play on the evening news. Still, readers young and not-so-much, those familiar with the Manson Family and those just learning of the crimes, must wonder the same thing: what causes a seemingly "normal" young woman to participate in something like that? This is precisely the territory Ostow's poetry explores.

It's all very well done. The reader is aware of Mel's "brokeness," as Mel frequently calls it. She often refers to being full of empty, hollow places, places inside her she longs to fill, fears to have filled. She always feels as if she's drowning, treading water, caught in the undertow. Henry offers her a lifeline, though Mel soon comes to realize that not even Henry can hold back the tide. Henry, who at first seems so godlike, has his own broken, hollow, empty and drowning places, places that will have terrible consequences for an innocent couple.

The subject matter is chilling. Yet the ending, remarkably, is a hopeful one. It's enough to keep the reader from drowning in the book's darkness, enough to keep Mel from descending into utter despair. There is a spark at the end that makes this narrative-in-verse seem redemptive, a cautionary tale, a morality play that makes it ideal to be read as poetry traditionally was, by a chorus in front of a large audience.

Family is told in the first person, entirely from Mel's point of view. It seems like a tale told collectively because of the historical aspect, the sense that Mel speaks for an important time and place in American

culture. It seems like a collective tale because of the way the "family" absorbs Mel and makes her part of it. It seems like a collective tale because there are at least two versions of Mel, including one who seems trapped in a mirror, helpless. I'm sure it will be absolutely stunning to hear as an audiobook, even without a chorus of women's voices.

Still, read the print version first. Micol Ostow's writing style includes short words and phrases set apart from the rest of the text by italics and braces. Some of the words that appear set apart like this are "static" and "white noise." In my head, the words that are set apart, sometimes complementing and other times contradicting Mel's narrative, sound like they're coming from a radio, not quite tuned to the right frequency. I imagine them as the words of mirror-Mel, the other, left-behind self who struggles to break through to Henry's Mel, but can't.

All in all, it's a remarkable achievement for Micol Ostow, one that's sure to be much talked about and debated among fans of young adults books, parents, librarians and book bloggers.

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### **karen says**

dear book, WHY ARE YOU POETRY??

yeah, this one is all on me. some wise customer had abandoned this book on one of my shelves at the store, and as i was walking it over the the resort cart, i read the flap, and i said to myself, "teen fiction about charles manson?? from a manson girl's perspective?? sign me up!!"

however.

it is not teen fiction about charles manson.

it is teen *poetry* about charles manson.

and even the most casual glance through the pages would have told me that. but i got ahead of myself. and that is what happened. who would write poetry about charles manson?? teenagers and lunatics.

why why why?? i honestly do not know what makes people write novels in verse. what is the point? it just seems lazy to me. because these aren't villanelles, here.

these are just  
sentences  
broken up to demonstrate  
the fractured nature  
of a personality enmeshed in  
cult dynamics  
maybe

or maybe this just takes up more space  
so less has to  
actually  
be  
written.

but it is infuriating! nothing is more boring than listening to the ramblings of someone who has been brainwashed. unless it is reading their bad poetry about it. so much repetition and nonsense. and yet it doesn't ring true - the end is just absurd. this is not any manson girl i know. because, yes, i went through a manson family fascination in my youth. not to the extent of joining a cult, but certainly to try to understand how anyone could have followed along with any of it, hippie dropouts or no, plentiful drugs or no, addictive charisma or no.

this is ouisch:

she was my favorite manson girl.

and even though my true-crime days are long behind me, i would have loved to have read a gritty teen fiction story that realistically depicted what it must have been like to have been in the head of someone who allowed themselves to get to the point where their own desires had been absorbed into someone else's will. you know, like *twilight*. but with more rich people killin'.

but dear god, not in poetry.  
never in poetry.

Sold was bad enough - why could that story not be told straight? why use gimmicks? and i am not anti-poetry. poetry is fine. there is just no need to tell a prolonged narrative in poetry; you're not homer, ftlog.

so maybe this book is great for some people, but i felt betrayed, even though it was my own damn fault.

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### **Lauren says**

Intense and startling yet compelling, Micol Ostow's Family is one of kind. It is dark and dreary yet that did not stop me from turning the pages in rapid speed, as this one book that you cannot put down once you have started it.

Melinda Jensen has never had an easy life. From a touchy "uncle" Jack to a mother who never cared enough, Melinda has had nearly no one to turn to in her past seventeen years of life. Lost beyond control, Melinda sets out to San Francisco with little to nothing, hoping that this time she will be able to find herself, or at least a part of herself. In San Francisco, she meets Henry, a man not that much older than her. He promises her a family, something she's always desired, and in an instant she agrees, not knowing this new path will test her in ways unimaginable, because this family not only shares everything, but they also contain some intense people. However, when she is faced with an ultimate dilemma, will Melinda be able to save herself before it's too late, or will she become yet another one of Henry's girls, brainwashed with little to nothing to call their own?

Prior to reading Family, I had only read two books by Ostow, Golden Girl and 30 Guys in 30 Days, two books that were the definition of light, fluffy reads, so to say this book, her newest one, was different would be a serious understatement. However, it was an interesting change to say the least.

For one, the characters in this are crazy, but in a way that is realistic given that they are part of a cult. As

mentioned above, Melinda is a girl lost beyond repair. She has been hurt in countless ways, and for her, Henry's promise was a solution to it all. In some ways I can see why she would stay, why she and the all others involved would let themselves become victim to Henry as well as each other, because the characters in this are all "misfits" lost to themselves and the world. So while all I wanted to throughout the novel was yell "run!" to Melinda, I understood, and more importantly, I rooted for her to see the light, to see that she could find help, that she still at the world at her fingertips.

However, what made this read the compelling read it was the fact that it was told in episodic verse. Every page was sparse yet it completely presented the world contained in a three dimensional way. Most importantly, Ostow didn't shy away from the gritty details that are usual associated with these type of things, and while it made Family a heard read at times, it made the novel all the more realistic and eye-opening so to say.

The only aspect of this novel that I was not big on was the last portion of the novel. It moved an extremely fast paced and when everything was finally said and done, I felt like it was missing something, more closure perhaps. Nonetheless, I can understand why it was that way.

Intense and unique, Micol Ostow's Family is not for the faint-hearted. It is a crazy novel, and the ending is even crazier, but I am sure fans of gritty fiction, such as Ellen Hopkins's books, will surely like this one.

Grade: B+

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### **Barbara says**

Based loosely on the Manson family who committed brutal murders in 1969, this novel in verse uses vivid descriptive language to explain how one teen, Mel, joins the cult. Fleeing from an abusive stepfather, her "uncle" Jack, and a mother who looked the other way during the abuse, Mel heads for the streets seeking love, freedom, and acceptance. She happens to meet Henry, a charismatic man who fills her head with drugs and dreams, and takes her back to his compound. There are rules at the compound, and Mel surrenders her driver's license and her will, beginnng her slow orbit around the sun that that Henry becomes for her. The author does a wonderful job of getting inside Mel's head as she describes how she finds comfort in the family that Henry has cobbled together. When family members must do degrading things such as begging or scavenging in the trash for food, she comforts herself by telling herself it's for the good of the family and at Henry's behest. Although she is drawn to one of the cult members, there are others who fill her with fear. Eventually, Henry's anger toward a man who promised him a recording contract rises, and some family members set out to wreak vengeance on the man. Here's where things went awry in my enjoyment of the book. Mel resists participating in the murders, even setting free one victim. While it's hard to understand how the victim could have managed to escape, given all the blood described in the book, it's even harder to understand how Mel could have summoned the courage or motivation to resist the commands of Henry. While the author provides passages that show her starting to question life on the compound, there is nothing to indicate that she would actually try to stop the brutality. The book left me with mixed feelings, stunned at some of the exquisite language, amazed at the author's ability to see into the heart of someone as broken as Mel, but ultimately disappointed by the ending. Still, this book certainly is worth reading and discussing, plumbing as it does the depths of loneliness of some and the predatory nature of others. It's certainly not for the faint-hearted.

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## **Caitie says**

So apparently this book was supposed to be about (or a fictional version) of the Manson family. But for several reasons I just didn't *care* about the main character. And maybe that was because she was supposed to be so lost that joining a cult made her soulless or something.....I couldn't bring myself to care about her background either.

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## **Samantha says**

noppppppe! I almost DNFed this book a few times, but I pushed through and finished it. I was so excited to have a book based on the Manson Family cult, since I love true crime and all that, but this was just not for me. I found the writing style a bit weird and it didn't really flow for me. Also it felt a little repetitive with the MC just saying how much she loved Henry so much. I just thought that you really didn't get to see the ways that the cult manipulated its members. She just kind of got invited into the cult and then she was completely devoted for no reason. There was one subtle writing technique that I did like, but I could see it getting on some peoples' nerves. The whole book was written in lowercase letters, except for when the MC was talking about Henry. I liked how that in her mind he was the only person deserving of capitalization.

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## **Karen says**

The dust jacket says this was "loosely" based on the Manson family murders, but if you've read *Helter Skelter* or versed yourself in the grim tale of the murders, as I have, then you know this is nearly identical in detail to that frightening patch of sixties history.

In *family*, teenaged Mel runs away from her abusive family--the stepfather who rapes her and the disconnected mother who turns a blind eye--and straight into the arms of the charismatic "Henry," who encourages Mel to join his family of hippies living on a ranch that used to be a Western movie set in Death Valley (exactly what the Manson family did.) Mel is swept into Henry's orbit; she is ripe for him--a broken, lost girl looking for love. And at first it's love she finds, communal caring. But the women aren't allowed to eat until the dogs do. The women sleep with all the men, and some of the women, if ordered. And everyone must turn over their IDs and money when they first enter the grounds. The signs are there, but Mel misses them, so obsessed is she with the man who promises to save her and be the father she never had. Father and lover, but so many boundaries begin to blur (and have already been blurred thanks to her stepfather) that Mel thinks little of the discrepancy in roles. She will do whatever Henry says, whenever he wants, and the reader knows from the beginning that Henry has ordered something dark and terrible. Mel says, "My hands are streaked with blood that is not my own. My hands are streaked with blood, and there is screaming." The rest of the novel tells of the downward spiral into helter-skelter, a night of blood and terror. Micol Ostow's gorgeous writing leads the reader there along with Mel, in free verse sinuous and compelling, like Henry himself.

I almost gave this five stars, but the verse does tend to get ever-so-slightly repetitive. Often this is a tactic the author uses--certain phrases are repeated to underscore their importance, or conversely, to show how the meaning of those phrases twists as the story goes on. The repetition is also a kind of reinforcement of the cult mentality, the repetition of ideas drilled into the heads of the acolytes so many times that those acolytes can no longer remember any words but those they've heard again and again. I saw the purpose of the repetition,

but it still began to grate on me, and in parts I wished the story would move a little faster. But mostly I loved this novel. Even those who tend to shy away from novels in verse will find themselves drawn into this story. Ostow's writing really is very engaging; she finds the perfect descriptions to make the reader understand how someone could fall so soundly under the influence of one charismatic man, especially if that person, and all her "sisters," are the broken, damaged people of this tale. The result is a novel both frightening and beautiful.

I'd like to say something about the end, but I can't without giving away important plot points, in fact, probably *the* most important plot point. If you have an interest in the Manson murders, cults, dark fiction, and broken people, this is the novel for you.

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### **Donna says**

Please don't ask me why I read this book. I saw it on Goodreads and it looked like it had some potential and upon opening the book I saw that it was written in episodic verse which I thought was pretty cool and I also thought that it would be a quick and easy read, in which it was, but all-in-all it is just a book. Simply a book. I am not sure if I hated it or if I liked it. I know that I did not love it. The whole repetitiveness was just mind boggling and quite annoying at times.

Family is set in 1969 during the Manson Murders and everyone pretty much in the entire book are hippies and lived on free love and mind control and drugs and blah and blah. I felt sorry for many of the young girls who got caught up in the all mighty Henry. That name was mentioned so much so that I can never look at a Henry again without thinking strange things....

Oh well, I really won't recommend the book but if you must then go on but don't blame me when you are done!

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### **Jade Gregerson says**

Melinda (Mel), is a teenager who was born into a broken family. Her father abuses her, and her mother knows- but does nothing to stop him. Mel runs away, and is found half-conscious on a park bench by a man who goes by the name Henry. After staying in his van for 3 days, he finally takes her to the ranch. There, she meets Shelly, Leila, Junior, and all the other "broken" people who stay there. Family. That's what they are to her now. The only thing she wants is a family, a place to belong. Almost the entire story is about how Mel tries to become "whole" again. How she floats around time trying to make people happy with her, make them love her. How she is willing to give up her choice, her decisions, if only she could have a family. Until she is no longer willing, floating, following. Until she decides to make her own choices. This book shows how she changes, even goes against the tide for once. Even just for a fraction of time. I liked the way this book was written. It had a very deep and intense sort of poetic flow to it. It has a sad sort of elegance to it, the way that she fell into belief that this family was the answer, only to realize that they too were tearing apart or "fraying at the edges". Also, I liked the new girl, Angela. She was not a part of the story for long at all, but I liked how she was able to say no to Henry. It did have a lot of repetition, which got tiring after a while. It made it difficult to distinguish whether or not the event was happening again, or being remembered. I would recommend this to people who enjoy poetry.

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## **Shelby says**

Family by Micol Ostow

-This book was written for people who like creepy and scary books.

-I give this book 4 stars.

-I thought this book was really good, it kept me on my feet and it was super creepy. The main character Mel, got treated super bad growing up so she left her old family behind and was basically homeless until the handsome Henry found her on a city bus and offered her life, a family, and love. Something Mel has always wanted but never got. The only thing i would change about this book is to not make the book so complicated and by that i mean the author changes the setting in the book a bunch like one minute you'll be reading "before" and the next page you'll be reading "after" it gets confusing, other then that the book is good.

-The main character Mel is very nonsocial shes very to herself and by that i mean she doesn't open up which i completely understand judging from the family she came from and i used to be very closed up a few years ago and after a while i came to realize that i need to open up to people and i need to say how im feeling sometimes because if i don't it will eventually get all bottled up and i wont be able to take it anymore. Mel finally realizes that when shes introduced and welcomed into Henry's family.

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## **Dayna Smith says**

This is work of historical fiction in verse. It is a re-telling of the story of the Manson family and the murders they committed in California in 1969. The book follows an abused teenage runaway who flees to San Francisco and is picked up "Henry." Henry introduces her to his "family" living at an old ranch where Westerns used to be filmed. He manipulates everyone in the "family" and eventually sends four of them out to kill, to spread his message. The story loosely follows the real version, with some changes that will be obvious to anyone familiar with the real events. Readers of this book might be tempted to explore the true story, which is vastly more chilling.

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## **Adriana says**

Me and this book did not get along. I was intrigued because it uses the Manson murders as a basis for the story. The main character, Mel, is one of Henry's girls (Henry is Charles Manson). Mel comes from a broken home, where she suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her mom's boyfriend, an "Uncle" Jack. She longs for a family, so naturally when Henry plucks her off of a dirty bench in San Francisco after Mel has run away from home, Mel goes to him very willingly. The book is told in verse and filled with violence, adoration for the character of Henry, and stories of life on the family's ranch. I got tired of the repetitiveness really quickly and Mel never gets to a better place. The book is depressing and dark, and honestly, it was lackluster and boring for me. I'm fascinated by crime stuff and I'll watch a special on the Manson murders in a heartbeat, but this book does nothing to add to the fascination. By the twentieth time the author wrote "inescapable" and "undertow" I was pretty much done with the book.

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## **Miss Bookiverse says**

Family liest sich wie der Gedankenstrudel einer psychisch-labilen, teilweise unter Drogeneinfluss stehenden

Person. Liest sich so und beschreibt ziemlich gut die Erzählerin. Durch die zahlreichen Wiederholungen ganzer Wortgruppen und inhaltlicher Fakten habe ich mich allerdings schnell gelangweilt. Das Buch ist in freier Versform verfasst und spiegelt so wirklich gut das Chaos der Protagonistin wieder, aber von einem Buch, das die Morde Charles Mansons fiktionalisiert, habe ich mir mehr Einblick versprochen. Wie tickt diese kranke Psyche? Was ist so charismatisch an ihm, dass er ganze Menschengruppen dazu bewegt mit ihm zu morden? Stattdessen ist Mel innerlich einfach kaputt und schwärmt für Henry (Manson), weil er eben charismatisch ist. Kein schlechtes Buch, aber zu wenig von dem Horror, den ich erwartet hatte.

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### **Kate says**

As someone who's read *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*, I was interested in the idea of a YA book "loosely based" on the Manson family. Seeing that it was written in poetry form made me pick this up, thinking it would be a quick read.

Mel has run away from home (and her sexually abusive "Uncle Jack") and is living on the streets in Haight-Ashbury when she meets "Henry" (aka Charles Manson). Henry feeds her and gives her drugs and has sex with her in his van for three days, then brings Mel back to the ranch Henry and his "family" call home. After a life where Mel has often felt adrift and alone, she welcomes the idea of family, even if it means sharing "free love" with all the male members of this "family" whether she wants to or not. Mel worships Henry, although she's a little unsure when he starts carrying a knife around and talking about "helter skelter."

There is the "before" and the "now" and the "after" - all jumbled together, but if the reader knows anything about the Manson family murders they will be able to figure out that the "after" is the infamous killing spree. I'm not sure exactly why the names of the characters were changed, but nothing - and I mean NOTHING - else was, except the END! (view spoiler)This strange altering of the truth made no sense to me. Either make it all true, or all false, but none of this halfway crap. It's ridiculous to call the cult leader "Henry" and still give him Charles Manson's philosophy of "helter skelter." Hence all the quotation marks in my summary...

For that matter, there is very little about the *Helter Skelter* here. I would have liked for there to be some Beatles reference, but instead Mel just says, Okay, *Helter Skelter*, don't know what it means but I'll go along with it. Also, a lot of what I found fascinating about *Helter Skelter* was the craziness of the trial, with the girls shaving their heads and carving X's on their foreheads, etc. I barely got to know "Henry" at all except through Mel's rosy-colored worship glasses. I would have preferred the author to have taken this character of Mel and instead of redeeming her, showed her descent into full-on cult worshipper.

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### **Bekka says**

It pains me to have to write this review because for so long I have pined after this book, and all I feel is let down. When I first heard that there was a YA novel about the Manson family murders, I was totally intrigued. I've read *Helter Skelter* many, many times, and I've watched countless documentaries on Manson himself, and his 'family.' I even have a favorite Manson girl:

These murders were vicious and brutal and scary. Really, really scary. The cult dynamics of the Manson

family were intriguing at best, and horrifying at their worst. I've always wondered what kind of person you'd have to be to be so brainwashed, so wrapped up in another person that you would commit heinous acts of violence and call it 'love.' This has eluded me ever since I heard of Charles Manson, and with FAMILY, I thought I could gain some insights. I was wrong.

When I found out that FAMILY was written in verse, I hesitated. And I'm glad I did. The only books written in verse that I've read are by Francesca Lia Block, but we all know that she is the name in that style, the best at what she does. So I guess either I've go really high standards, or I haven't read enough books like this to totally grasp the why of writing in verse. It seemed so... stupid. It literally took two pages to tell the reader how much Mel loved doing laundry. I am not making this shit up. And – this happened more than once – I would turn the page only to read something literally copied and pasted from a previous chapter. Also, the wording was so, so, so repetitive and freaking redundant. I skipped so many pages of "always, never, His message, Henry, no ego" OVER AND OVER again. Seriously? I freaking get it.

I couldn't really connect well with any of the characters either. Mel is just a husk of a person by the time the book starts, so I don't really think there is anything to connect or relate to. I mean, I don't even know what she or Henry (aka Charlie) look like. I never figured out exactly what Henry did to make Mel believe in him so much. I mean, I could guess a bunch of theories as to why Mel fell for it all, but none of them would be concrete correct, because it was never touched on in the book. One day Mel runs away from home, and the next day she is sleeping with Henry in his van doing acid. There was so much disconnect between me and Mel that I just couldn't accept that she wanted to be there.

The only character that I really liked – loved – was Shelly. She was Mel's closest confidant, best friend, sister in the compound. She felt wholly real to me, entirely fleshed out. A story (even told in verse) from Shelly's point of view would have been dynamic and entertaining and captivating. Shelly actually goes through some character arcs throughout the novel that really made me feel something for her, made me feel close to her. Mel never actually changes or even makes decisions during the novel, so it was hard to tell if she grew or not. But Shelly was fascinating, and broken, and just plain old crazy. I loved her.

There were a few passages that were well written towards the end. When the climax hit, that is, the murders, I was frantically turning the page. But fuck did it take long to actually describe what was happening. The murders only took place for like five minutes, but it took a grand total of 120 pages to describe them. And THERE IS NO DETAIL at all. All it is is Mel having a heart attack over what she's doing. There is no gore, no violence, no chaos. Nothing. Just Mel saying "no never always infinity Henry His message shaking drowning premise promise" for fucking 120 pages.

The ending was a total letdown for me. It really sealed the deal for me as far as NOT buying into Mel's brainwashing and devotion to Henry. It was dumb. The synopsis says that this novel is 'loosely' based on the Manson murders, but it follows the entire story to a fault. So I really, really didn't understand why Ostow chose this ending.

In all, this book could have been something special. It could have really shown the violence and the horror of the Manson family freak show. It could have given us a glimpse inside the head of a brainwashed victim of a cult. With a better ending, and NOT being written in freaking verse, this book could have been phenomenal, but instead it was a let down.

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