

What Girls are Made of

Elana K. Arnold

Carolrhoda Lab, 2017

Reviews

[Booklist](#) (1 February 2017): “Arnold's latest reveals how capricious first love and our trust in it can be. Nina, 16, is trying to make sense of the obsession she feels for her first boyfriend. I know it isn't okay to care this much about a boy. I know it's not feminist, or whatever, to make all my decisions based on what Seth would think, she chastises herself. Besides, she has grown up being told by her mother that all love has limits; it can't just surge forth unbridled. Then, just as Nina and Seth's relationship turns more intimate, he abandons her without explanation. In Nina's grief, she explores the origins of her longing for love, recalling a trip she took with her mother to Italy to study statues of saints, intertwining the saints' suffering with what she views as her own. Nina's honest musings about her vapid relationship with Seth, as well as the relationship of her fickle parents, demonstrate a keen sense of introspection and self-respect. Smart, true, and devastating, this is brutally, necessarily forthcoming about the crags of teen courtship.”

[Center for Children's Books](#) (1 April 2017): “I could stop loving you at anytime,” Nina's mother informs a fourteen-year-old Nina. “No one loves without conditions.” Several years later, Nina understand the conditions by which her boyfriend Seth loves her: have plenty of sex, give him space, and, she learns one day, to promise to be willing to die with him. When she can't fulfill that last one, he breaks up with her, and now she is left pregnant and alone, contemplating the stories of the virginal saints she learned about while on a trip to Italy with her mother years ago and preparing for her abortion. Nina is powerful, messy, and broken, and her voice oscillates between an aloof coolness and anxious neediness...The separate facets of the same Nina—sexual, emotional, thoughtful, lonely—finally begin to integrate into a whole in the hesitantly hopeful ending.”

[Kirkus](#) (1 February 2017, Starred Review): “Pulling back the curtain on the wizard of social expectations, Arnold explores the real, knotted, messy, thriving heartbeat of young womanhood... Nina's embroiling first-person prose alternating with what are revealed to be her own short stories lifts and examines the veils that encapsulate all the "shoulds" and "supposed tos" of teenage girlhood to expose bodily function, desire, casual cruelty, sex and masturbation, miscarriage and abortion, and, eventually, self-care. Arnold interweaves myriad landscapes, from the parched affluence of California neighborhoods to the ordered sadness of a high-kill animal shelter where Nina volunteers, from the sculpted terrain of Rome's brutalized virgin martyrs to the imperfect physicality of Nina's own body, into a narrative wholeness that is greater than its parts. Unflinchingly candid, unapologetically girl, and devastatingly vital.”

[School Library Journal](#) (1 January 2017): “Nina has had a crush on Seth since fifth grade, but it wasn't until the summer after her 16th birthday that he finally acknowledged her feelings for him.

Now, Nina will do whatever is necessary to maintain his affection. She is fully aware that all love comes with conditions; her mother, in particular, has made that very clear. But as the only child of dysfunctional parents, Nina craves the attention that Seth offers. Thoughts of him occupy her every waking hour, so when she unwittingly fails his unexpected test of her loyalty, she finds herself alone and adrift, especially after she makes a startling realization. When even her best friend fails to support her, Nina looks for help and solace in unlikely places, including at a dog shelter. In an afterword, Arnold explains that this story is the result of her anger at and complicity in the rules that society applies to girls. Her overarching theme is the fallacy of believing in unconditional love. The author presents a hopeful conclusion as Nina learns that self-love and fulfillment can be found through helping others.”

Awards

2017 - [National Book Award Finalist](#)

Lists

[The Amelia Bloomer Booklist](#)

References

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