

Surviving Love and Cruelty



My Absolute Darling is one of those novels where you step back and wonder how the author could have crafted something so twisted and unsettling. It's the same feeling I get after reading any of Stephen King's work: utter shock and disbelief. Gabriel Tallent crafted characters that made my heart ache and stomach turn chapter by chapter.

Julia "Turtle" Alveston is a ruthless 14-year-old girl who lives in Mendocino California with her father, Martin, in near isolation since the death of her mother. Many little girls grow up playing with dolls and having sleepovers, but Turtle enjoys her Sig Sauer, her most favorite gun, and the company of her father. Turtle is no ordinary little girl; she struggles to have friends and complete her schoolwork while her father continuously hounds her to never leave him. Things only become more unsettling from there.

The novel opens on what seems to be a typical day at the Alvestons, with raw eggs and beer for breakfast.

Turtle and her father are going over Turtle's vocabulary list. When Turtle struggles her father's tone turns ill. "You're being a little bitch. Are you trying to be a little bitch, kibble?" By the end of the first chapter I was aware of the tones of abuse and incest that follow Turtle for the rest of the novel. No matter to happens, she is constantly

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by Gabriel Tallent

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reminded that she is her father's pet and nothing more. It isn't until she meets two boys, Jacob and Brett, that she has a look at the outside world and what she's missing out on.

This is Gabriel Tallent's first published novel. It has already gained notice and it's understandable as to why. Tallent's style of writing is articulate and detailed; each sentence perfectly captures the setting, the action or thought of a character, or the storm brewing in the plot. Each detail matters. Every thought Turtle has brings you to her perspective. She is sexually abused by her father but she doesn't fight him. If anything she fights herself more for not doing enough for him. She loves her father more than anything or anyone else, which is the most twisted thing about this story. Tallent shows the thought process of an abuse victim who stays with someone who hurts them. The concept shocks me, considering the protagonist is a 14-year-old girl and the author is a grown man. I can imagine it being very hard to write about a child like this.

As someone who knows very little about guns I was shocked at Turtle's adoration of them. She cares for and cleans all guns within her and Martin's possession, and she's good at it. She has an incredible knowledge of nature with tides, navigation, and overall survival. It's clear

“...THOSE PARTS OF YOU I TURN FROM, I WILL TURN FROM FOREVER AND I WILL NOT AT THE END OF IT FIND THAT I AM LIKE YOU...”

luxury is something they'd rather live without. Martin reads conspiracy novels and stresses on how he or Turtle could die at any moment if they aren't ready to defend themselves at all times.

“IT SEEMS TO HER THAT SHE HAS SPENT HER ENTIRE LIFE HOPING THAT HE WAS THE MAN SHE BELIEVED HE WAS...”

that Tallent put time and research into all of these things, careful details to show what matters to these character and what does not. Survival is what matters to them,

Even when Turtle develops her first high school crush the story does not lead to boy-meets-girl, but rather only heightens Turtle's battle with Martin.

Martin is the villain and it's obvious by the end of the first chapter. I think one of the main reasons I couldn't put this novel down is that I wanted to see what would come of him and, hopefully, his demise. He's pure evil, with no redeemable qualities, which is what I believe Tallent was going for. It's hard to craft a character so entirely despicable that you don't pity them. This novel was a thriller from start to finish. Martin's character is the lighter to the madness, the embodiment of psychosis. Every time he went near Turtle I got anxious. Turtle's fear bleeds from the pages.

As a lover of thriller novels, this one had me hooked. As I read, I walked in Turtle's shoes, saw what she saw, felt what she felt, and my heart ached for her in the way her heart ached for herself. For anyone who enjoys a novel that leaves you wanting more, just know that I'm praying for a sequel.

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