



Girl Detached

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Girl Detached exposes a hidden world of grooming, sexual exploitation, predatory adult males, and the sale of young virgins in a graphic context where, for example, fellatio and anal sex are explicitly present. Manuela Salvi has published over 20 books for children and young adults, but this novel has been banned in her native Italy. It now appears in a translation by the experienced Denise Muir with [The Bucket List](#) [4], who plan to publish 'bold and truthful writing for children and young people'. In her post-text notes, Salvi writes of her experience of 'inequality, discrimination, homophobia and anti-feminism' in Italy; and her renewed determination to make her voice heard. She is currently working on her PhD (I think on forms of censorship in children's and young adult fiction), funded by the Jacqueline Wilson scholarship at **Roehampton University**.

Sixteen year old Aleksandra has had a guarded childhood. Her youthful mother handed her over as a baby to her grandmother and, as far as Alek ever knew, took no interest in her. Her protective Gran restricted her horizons; and her stammer hasn't helped her social confidence either. She loses that impediment 'as many do' when she steps onto a stage armed with her character's words; it is within her local theatre group that she finds both fluency and acceptance. When her Gran dies, she has no option but to live with a mother she barely knows 'she is still angry with her. Life in her new home is awkward, so she's glad to find a friend next door in Megan, constantly at war with her own mother. Megan has calculating plans for Alek, introducing her to a whirl of shopping, alcohol, drugs and parties, where girls (mostly Alek's age or younger) readily strip off to dance on table tops before leering, older men. In return for the banknotes stuffed into their bras and thongs 'to Alek's innocent confusion' the girls are led off to side rooms or dark corners, where they are soon at work, their heads between their clients' thighs. Alek joins the dancers, but for her things are different. She is surprised and entranced by the attentions of the courteous Ruben 'a smart undergraduate, equipped with car, flat, beach house and hotshot lawyer parents.

The plot now races from party to party, each one luring Alek further into Ruben's web. We can see she's being groomed, Alek cannot. Huge sums change hands 'customers are hungry for young virgins, and Ruben has a client lined up for Alek. We are in the Land of Savile. Alek's 11th hour escape depends upon the unconventional support of Helena, the theatre carpenter, and Jonah the technician; both want revenge, or at least justice, against abusers like those Alek has evaded.

There is no soft porn or moral ambiguity here. My reservations concern plausibility. Alek's absolute gullibility seems at odds with her self-awareness; Salvi must surely have done her research, but how accurate is the account of such parties in such a town ? and where is that town anyway? The place is so featureless (?block after block of identical streets lined with soulless concrete boxes?) that it's unclear whether we are in Italy or the UK - and to believe in the repellent Ruben and his circle, we need a specific societal context. The theatre set-up has a ramshackle charm, but it bears little relation to the way semi-professional or community theatre actually works ? at least in contemporary Britain. The group are working on Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* - and they have been in rehearsal for nine months. An eccentric choice of play, you might think, for teenage actors in such a cultural wilderness, but the text does allow Salvi to draw parallels with what's happening to Alek in the vicious world of those parties.

Yet the fortunes of the likeable and vulnerable Alek are compelling ? even on a second reading. Readers would probably have enjoyed the come-uppance someone as loathsome as Ruben deserved, but Salvi prefers to lead us away from an impending court case to a happier, more romantic ending. The novel could come to be seen as both groundbreaking and controversial ? hence my 5 Star rating; adults with an interest in YA fiction and its readers could well agree with Melvin Burgess (?Such a brave book!). Is this a world teenagers know from social media ? or even their own town? It's another of those texts where BfK readers might wish we could listen to them saying what they make of it all.

Source URL (retrieved on Oct '20): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/222/childrens-books/reviews/girl-detached>

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