



The Girl in the Broken Mirror

Books Reviewed:

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~~Not a Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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?But until she could say the word for what had happened to her ? that terrible, vile, shameful word ...? Nine painful pages into a Prologue, readers will already realise that fifteen year old Jay has been raped; ?the bruises, the dried blood and the sticky stuff on her legs?, ?the soiled sheets?, the bulging right eye, the futile scouring of her skin with Dettol in a scalding shower, the face in the mirror she finds repulsive and grotesque?. Matt will never want her now.

The next 130 pages (Part 1) trace the preceding months for Jay ? short for Jaya, short for Jayalakshmi. Her comfortable world had fallen apart three years earlier when her Dad had driven his car into a tree, having just learned his business had failed. Jay?s life at St Montague?s, the North London private school she loved, also came to an abrupt end; her new school, Kingswell Secondary, is far more abrasive, though she?s made good friends in Chloe and Matt. Now her mother, Neela, unable to make ends meet, decides they have no choice but to quit their tiny rented flat above a grocer?s shop and accept an offer of accommodation with distant relatives Aunty Vimala and Uncle Bali. Jay?s Dad had no time for the rules and restrictions of traditional British Indian families - he would have ridiculed Aunty Vimala?s regime with all its snobbery and hypocrisy. In return for an attic room for Neela and a basement storeroom for herself, Jay and her mum are tacitly expected to fulfil the duties of domestic servants at No. 42, Primrose Avenue.

Aunty V. decides that Uncle Bali?s 60th Birthday is the perfect excuse for a party ? 100 guests, a marquee, the house and gardens looking their best, no need for outside caterers since Jay and her mother are such good cooks and can double up as waiters. Experienced YA readers, remembering that Prologue, will surely anticipate that a party is once again likely to precipitate plot catastrophes. Deven, Aunty Vimala?s adored older son, comes home from uni and invites his mates along ? all as loathsome and chauvinistic as Deven himself. Late in the party, Jay retreats to her basement, only for Deven and his friends to start their own party in the small gymnasium next to her room. What follows is written with unflinching intensity as the boys use Jay as a kind of rag-doll plaything in their drunken dancing. Gang rape is imminent. Ash, Aunty V?s gentle younger son, seems to have saved the day for Jay, only for Deven to return and savagely assault her.

Part 2 opens with a distraught Jay wandering the streets, getting as far as she can from Primrose Avenue. In a coincidental encounter which might have given a Victorian novelist second thoughts, Jay literally stumbles into a woman on the street who turns out to be none other than Sita Anandhati, the retired matron of St Montague?s, her old

school. With her medical skills and a kindly wisdom born of experience, Sita begins the slow, loving work of restoring Jay's body, then her sense of self-worth. In time, Neela also comes to lodge with Sita, an arrangement which suits all three. Rehab is not without alarms ? at one point Jay hunts her abuser with murderous knife in hand, at another only her inability to tie a noose with the cord of an electric lawnmower thwarts a suicide attempt. Contrasting values are at work. Sita grew up in the Indian community in Kenya, immigrating to the UK hungry for a life in the West. Neela and Jay must first find each other again, and then rediscover the liberal confidence they had enjoyed when Jay's father was alive. By contrast, the culture of No. 42 is brittle, superficial and sexist.

The experiences of rape victims are well-documented in our society, but this is no clichéd account. Jay's shame, her lonely loss of direction, her conviction that no-one could value or love her again, read as a unique experience. Certainly, there is a strong moral purpose here, charged with compassion and driven by anger. Readers may be challenged and informed as they are absorbed by Jay's story, but they will not be subjected to didacticism or melodrama.

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