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How Hard Can Love Be?

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Check out the content and the voice: "[Melody was] all tumbling blonde hair, and glowy skin, and teeth like cosmetic dentistry adverts, and legs so far up she'd have to apply deodorant to her knee pits." Then, by contrast: "Well actually, the three of us have formed this club. It's like a feminism club where we meet and talk about women's rights. We've campaigned for stuff too. Like, we got that horrible pop song about rape banned from being played on the college jukebox." Readers of **Am I Normal Yet?** will know about the club, founded by Evie, Lottie and Amber. That first book of the Spinster Club trilogy, nominated for the **2016 Carnegie**, focussed on Evie's OCD; this sequel finds the girls, as *Usborne's* publicity puts it, "facing down tough issues with the combined powers of friendship, feminism and cheesy snacks".

We meet 17 year-old Amber heading through airport security on her way to California, with the "world's worst hangover" after a heavy farewell night on the sambuca with Evie and Lottie. She's struggling not to vomit, and at the same time she's embroiled in yet another venomous row with her Laura Ashley clad "cliched evil stepmother" and her "standardised evil stepsibling," Craig. Ineffectual Dad is helpless in the crossfire. Amber is exhausted by it all, feeling betrayed not only by Dad, but also by her alcoholic Mum who left a couple of years ago to be with her therapist, Bumface Kevin. California is where Mum is now, running The Mountain Summer Camp with her new partner. Amber is to work there for bed and board, hoping desperately that she can somehow reclaim the mother she lost in the haze of booze and marital despair.

So far, you might think, so YA Conventional. And much of life at the Camp "the kids, the counsellors, the programme, the partying - is what you might expect. But Amber, with her frizzy ginger hair, pale freckled skin and tall frame, her restless mind, swift tongue and forthright views, is not your conventional YA narrator. Her English take on the American Way of Summer Camp Life makes the oddities of it all readily accessible "and funny - to British readers. But Holly Bourne's distinctive achievement is that she manages the quick-fire narrative and dialogue so attractive to YA fiction readers and yet also, as Amber begins to deal with her growing feelings for co-worker Kyle, Bourne interweaves the complexity of a first relationship with its self-doubts, disconcerting passions and revelations. All that alongside an exploration of a mother/daughter relationship in which both are damaged. Amber is too honest, too self-aware, to settle for the stereotypes of some second-hand feminism "she's constantly examining and adjusting her unique perspective on things. Beneath his requisite tan and clean good looks, Kyle's as anxious about what he sees as his conformist Prom-

King, Ivy League Adonis personality as Amber is about her body and, well, just about everything else. As for Mum, Amber has to recognise that far from being the mother she lost, she is still absorbed by the self-centred needs and deceptions of recovery from alcoholism.

Amber's dialogues with her Spinster Clubmates back home, along with her searching conversations with Kyle don't avoid those 'tough issues' the publishers claim for the book. But the risk of excessive analysis is always avoided: there are wide-eyed visits to Yosemite and Las Vegas to enjoy, and life at the Camp includes an episode in which Mum, to Amber's horror, uses a Sorting Hat to allocate campers and counsellors to Hogwarts Houses (too bad if you're not in Gryffindor). And then there is that balancing, often self-mocking, exploratory perspective from Amber.

Online, Holly Bourne speaks of her concerns about mental health and inequality (on which she has written in **The Guardian**). She also notes: 'I want to inspire readers to campaign for the changes they want to see in society... The Spinster Club trilogy is essentially my call to arms.'

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