

A Girl with a Bad Reputation

Dave Gioia

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This is a gem of a story that could be another of literature's coming-of-age character studies.

Dave Gioia's *A Girl with a Bad Reputation* is a simple story with complex undertones. Colleen Hanrahan is a sixteen-year-old girl coming of age during the tumultuous 1960s. Colleen's journey is equally riotous, awkward, uncomfortable, and momentous, and at times shines with humor and intelligence. Civil rights, sexual awakening, psychological issues, and relationships are held up to a microscope in this fascinating character study of a girl with a bad reputation.

Outwardly, Colleen is a typical high school student, dealing with friends and studies. But Colleen has a second life that is about to come to light. Highly intelligent, but equally manipulative, she uses sex as a means of establishing control among her peers. Word spreads and she earns a reputation, one that she initially revels in. Until, that is, the darker side of notoriety rears its ugly head.

A series of violently abusive relationships begins to open her eyes. Colleen is forced to examine the psychological underpinnings of her desire to control men, leading to some shocking revelations. Along the way, she stumbles through historical events, including the Civil Rights Movement and Woodstock.

Colleen's development is the major focus of the story. Both she, and it, are fairly realistic and well fleshed out. However, the secondary characters she interacts with are less so. For example, Byron, a black man she meets at a local college, is initially nice and lulls Colleen into a relationship, but then he takes out his deep-seated race issues on her in a BDSM-fueled sexual encounter.

Colleen manages to turn the tables on him and regain the upper hand, leading to a happy long-term relationship. These transformations are confusing, though. Byron accepts them passively, and there is no further examination of his sudden and fundamental changes. Still, Colleen's struggle to define herself while maintaining her dignity is fascinating to follow.

The prose is engaging, and Colleen's journey is interesting to trace. Some of the material could be pruned down, particularly the extended sex scenes. Once it is established Colleen is skilled, these muddle the genre and detract from the story. The text's chronology is also difficult to follow. Often the timeline jumps forward dramatically and without context. Typos are an additional distraction.

A Girl with a Bad Reputation is the insightful story of a troubled girl living in a difficult time period. It explores themes of personal maturation and the nation's confrontation with the Civil Rights Movement. It has the makings of a gem, and could be another of literature's coming-of-age character studies.

JOHN M. MURRAY (December 10, 2015)

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