

A Monster Like Me

Wendy S. Swore

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Sophie's got a hemangioma—a sure sign that she's a monster, she thinks. In Wendy S. Swore's tender *A Monster Like Me*, the imaginative grade schooler battles isolation and bullying to discover that growing stronger sometimes means realizing that there's more to life than meets the eye.

Newly arrived in Portland, Sophie and her single mother, Marlene, find themselves settling into familiar patterns. Early chapters highlight Sophie's self-protective measures, from wearing goggles to feigning illness. Armed with her beloved *Big Book of Monsters*—a comforting way to make sense of a threatening world—Sophie gradually learns that her insistence on fantasy is costing her relationships.

The book strikes a careful balance, depicting realistic cruelties in everyday encounters like schoolyard name-calling. Sophie's shame and unease are rendered with heartrending clarity, alongside Marlene's complicated love, which both protects Sophie and holds her back. Other characters, including a man disfigured in combat, serve as thoughtful counterpoints, showing Sophie how others live with physical differences. A more dramatic, inevitable plot turn jolts Sophie out of her bubble; she sees there are always people with more serious problems.

The book shines in its portrayal of finding self-acceptance. Pages from the monster book add occasional life tips and lead toward lessons in gratitude, and Sophie's flights of inspiration set her on a search for a cure. If some characters seem too sweet—including Autumn, a girl who declares herself a best friend, and Autumn's Irish grandmother, who brings old-world charm with her fairy tale cottage home—they also provide needed safety nets.

A Monster Like Me is an intelligent and provocative story about a memorable girl who discovers her own unique talents, reminding those around her that everyone—no matter how they look—feels love and pain.

KAREN RIGBY (March/April 2019)

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