



All I Know

Holly C LaBarbera

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Young members of intertwined families forge a complicated bond in the tense coming-of-age novel All I Know.

As she grows up from girlhood, a young woman comes to terms with the devastating effects of her family trauma in Holly C. LaBarbera's novel *All I Know*.

In her spirited childhood, Kai formed happy memories during her family's regular vacations and get-togethers with their close friends, the Tylers. The Tylers' oldest son, Josh, is Kai's childhood love—she believes that he is the love of her life. But as Kai grows older, moving through college and beyond, the fissures resulting from addiction and abuse plague both families, rupturing their once-close bonds.

Early on, the book lingers on one-on-one interactions well, emphasizing its aching interfamily ties. Kai's twin, Kade, is Kai's other half; they often sit back-to-back with each other for comfort. And Kai has openhearted conversations with her battle-worn, unyielding mother, even as her father's flightiness and excessive loyalty to his friend compromises her trust in him. Kai also eavesdrops on others' conversations, gathering information that compromises the families' "perfect" façades.

In its first third, the story is driven by the choices that each of the characters makes, with their complicated family intimacies best established via Kai's maturing perspective. For example, a playful lake getaway is described in warm, glowing terms. But Kai's sense of levity fades when she watches her father do nothing as Josh's father beats his sons—and Kade. She develops increasing awareness of the consequences of her family's entanglements with the Tylers, resulting in her loss of innocence—and Kade's falling-out with his family.

Though these early tragedies are deep and involving, the complicated intra- and interfamily relationships that are developed in the first part of the book are sidelined in its later portions. Indeed, after Kai starts college and reconnects with Josh, beginning a new, tumultuous romantic relationship with him, its focus wanes. The wide-ranging effects of family trauma are foregone in favor of repetitive, will-they-won't-they sequences between the young couple.

Further, there's limited integration of Kai's thoughtful, moving commentary on the lingering effects of trauma into the story once her romantic interests take over. Even the extensive wisdom of Kai's mother falls out of the novel as it progresses. And the complex, age-gap intimacy between Kai and Josh is also flattened, with countless surface-level depictions and mentions of sex replacing the once-deep explorations of their often uncomfortable connection and power imbalance.

In the coming-of-age novel *All I Know*, a young woman struggles to break free of cycles of trauma to find love and belonging.

ISABELLA ZHOU (January 4, 2024)

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