

Any Twenty

Gary L. Brown

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Any Twenty is a complex novel in which personal and political conflicts converge in a reality show setting.

In Gary L. Brown's novel *Any Twenty*, a crime occurs behind the scenes of a reality television series.

Nadia, a creative director of reality shows, has a rift with her coworkers. She expects to be fired; instead, her boss sends her on vacation. While in Washington, DC, she meets Nana Lisa, a Virginia horse trainer, by chance. Their conversation yields an idea for a new show, based on the theory that people can solve their own concerns better than politicians. *Any Twenty* is born: twenty people, chosen from around Nana Lisa's farm, form teams on two sides of issues and are paid to find solutions with the help of voters.

After three episodes, the show is a rousing success—though, at one point, the show's participants threaten to quit because viewers have sent them threats in reaction to their viewpoints. Nadia wants to recognize Nana Lisa at a ceremony, but Nana Lisa sends David, her grandson, instead. Meanwhile, a fire at Nana Lisa's farm destroys a barn and injures her. David and Nadia return to Virginia to investigate the tragedy—and their mounting feelings for each other.

The importance of teamwork is central to Nadia's characterization. She seeks to live up both to her boss's graciousness and to her deceased father's expectations by working on behalf of her greater community. Her closeness to Nana Lisa and her involvement in the investigation bear out these intentions. And the connections drawn between the *Any Twenty* show and the drama at Nana Lisa's property further amplify the book's themes: here, group dynamics reflect intrapersonal dynamics, and people disagree among themselves because they each bring their own problems and histories to their discussions. Other characters are developed in realistic terms, too; the book emphasizes both their positives and their negatives, including their struggles with PTSD, abuse, and addiction. However, those whose personal demons make them true enemies of the social good are too heavily contrasted with David and Nadia.

The chapters are short and episodic, shifting between the story's layers in a fast fashion. Though the constant, interrelated dramas are focused on a central outcome, their explorations depend on the overuse of conversations. Few sentences in the whole book appear outside of quotation marks, and many of those still consist of people's thoughts. And the book's settings are underdescribed; messages about fruitful discussions and teamwork dominate the text, amplified by statistics and other facts that sound unnatural when delivered in the course of people's conversations.

Any Twenty is a complex novel in which a successful reality show reveals where personal and political conflicts converge.

MARI CARLSON (November 18, 2022)

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