

Becoming Beatriz

Tami Charles

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Fifteen-year-old Beatriz Mendez lives a split life between school and gang life, caring for her mother and enforcing gang rules, dancing with an attractive Haitian boy, and carrying a razor blade tucked in her cheek. Set in the 1980s, Tami Charles's gritty *Becoming Beatriz* shows Beatriz's limited choices and the strength she finds to create new ones.

Beatriz, her brother Junito, and her mother leave Puerto Rico for New York City to escape her father's abuse. Junito turns to dealing to augment the scarce income from their bodega. He forms and heads a gang, the Diablos, which leads to his death in the book's opening pages. His mother's grief renders her a vague, emotionally absent character. The dancing that once defined Beatriz now feels worlds away.

Beatriz is also in New York at a time when *Fame* was at its height and Debbie Allen served as the toughest taskmaster every dancer ever wanted. The only remaining bond between Beatriz and her mother is the television show, and the power of hope that is defined within it is evoked by the plot. Tryouts come to the city, and Beatriz is lured back to dance. But gang life—blood in, blood out, the trap set for Beatriz with her gang initiation at twelve—still looms.

Beatriz is an intense lead, fully aware of the fact that the people and things that she loves could destroy her. Her narration is sympathetic, even through difficult events. She wriggles through narrower and narrower choices, always striving to find another way.

In the tough and hopeful *Becoming Beatriz*, gangs and hatred can destroy families from the inside out, but talent and grit help people to heal and rise.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (September / October 2019)

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