



## Before We Were Blue

**E. J. Schwartz**

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Two troubled girls form a lifelong connection in E. J. Schwartz's compassionate novel *Before We Were Blue*.

Frail but charismatic Rowan doesn't give the first impression of having been traumatized. When she was admitted to RR, a rehabilitation center for girls with disordered eating, one of her early acts was to dye her hair raging purple; one of her next was to establish that she should not be trifled with. But her edges softened when Shoshana arrived. Their bond was instant, and they became each other's shelters.

But Shoshana is grateful that Rowan and the other Grays—the most at-risk girls at RR—have no access to social media or television. For once, she is anonymous; it's a fortunate reprieve, considering that her celebrity fed her anorexia in the first place. As she struggles to recover, and also to stay in Rowan's addictive orbit, her desires begin to clash. Both she and Rowan are left to decide what matters most: staying moored among the Grays, but being together; or working toward becoming Blue and being released from RR, potentially alone.

The novel handles its characters' eating disorders with sensitivity, naming contributing factors, honoring the girls' fears, and staying mindful of the dangers represented by the disease. It treats its queer heroines with dignity, and it is sober in recognizing the aftermath of a rape. In these instances, the story stands to be a balm for those wrangling their own traumas, pains, and loneliness.

While Rowan and others at RR seem vicious at first—some even engage in casual antisemitism that Shoshana is left to internally cringe through—their vulnerability becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses toward its warm, hopeful ending, which teaches its heroines that their pain, though real and worthy of respect, doesn't have to last forever.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2021)

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