



Cuts That Don't Bleed

Michelle L. Rodgers

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An outwardly strong but still vulnerable woman struggles to survive her brutal past in Cuts That Don't Bleed, a thriller about love and justice.

A survivor of rape and childhood sexual abuse strives to avenge her past in Michelle L. Rodgers's thriller *Cuts That Don't Bleed*.

As the novel begins, Sydney is a teenager adrift on Seattle's meanest streets. After surviving a rape and beating, she leaves town, devotes herself to her studies, and becomes a specialist in forensic radiology. But her assault left physical and emotional scars. She brings anger and distrust into a series of cautious but sexually explosive relationships with women. When her career brings her back to Seattle, she employs the tools of her medical trade to torture those who mistreated her in her teens. The novel heats up when Sydney's schedule of retributive justice is threatened by her relationship with a tough, letter-of-the-law-abiding police officer.

The book's plot works through several themes; as its themes develop, so do its stakes. Sydney has no trouble attracting women, but she does not allow them to know her. She works toward revenge against those who victimized her, even when her plan risks exposure to the law. She also risks being found out by her lover, the detective in charge of apprehending, rather than executing, criminals. These themes—of sex versus love, and revenge versus the law—play into a satisfying psychological and sexual stew, culminating in a showdown that features Sydney and two badass women up against ruthless Russians who trick teenagers into sex slavery.

The irony of the book's title is fully realized in its plot, referencing Sydney's outer and inner scars and her field of expertise, noninvasive autopsy, which provides her with instruments of medical inquiry to punish people, rather than to make discoveries. And the book's tone complements Sydney's hard edges. From her inner musings and conversations when she was a streetwise teenager, through to the aggressive sexual banter she has with her lovers and her victims, her style of speaking and thinking matches her cold-as-ice attitude. Though aloofness is a constant in her characterization, tension, too, is expressed through the contrast of her deep-seated rage, which taints her relationships, with her beauty and brilliance as a student and a professional.

The women around Sydney are often successful and complex; they come together to serve justice, and their presence is a point of grace. Though Sydney sometimes acts like a ruthless sociopath, the fact that her victims are sexual predators makes her behavior easier to accept, even as her personal guilt is glossed over to focus on topics of the law and justice.

But too much space is given to Sydney's experiences and sexual relationships during college, medical school, and a research study post in Alaska; after a while, these experiences stop contributing to her development and end up slowing the plot. The book's episodes involving her experience with rape survivors are more relevant.

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JOE TAYLOR (January 16, 2021)

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