

Derby Girl: A Memoir

Sammi Jones

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Jones's story has come full circle: she's clean, out of the closet, and back home.

For Sammi Jones, an MFA program in creative writing may have taken her to the inauspicious location of Fargo, North Dakota, but it was joining a roller derby team that kept her sane. Her energetic memoir, *Derby Girl*, weaves together her roller-derby practice with waking up to her sexual identity and drinking problem.

Jones was two years into graduate studies at Minnesota State University Moorhead when she braved grueling three-hour tryouts to make the Fargo-Moorhead Derby Girls league. After months of practice, skating grew effortless, and she felt accepted by this motley bunch of women with odd derby-specific nicknames (hers is “Toni Crush”) and vocabulary. Yet all along she knew she wasn’t being honest with herself about her sexuality and alcoholism.

The book shrewdly uses the lingo and format of a roller-derby bout to provide its structure: sections are labeled Turns 1 through 4, and a “Timeout: Derby 101” interlude in the middle gives diagrams and photographs that explain the gear, track, and plays.

The memoir’s short, titled chapters function almost like mini-essays. Some vignettes give glimpses into Jones’s past—her Catholic upbringing; an earlier drunk-driving incident—or contrast her time on the derby B travel team with her jobs cleaning houses and working on a local magazine. One of the standout pieces, a two-pager titled “Jones Generations,” gives third-person remarks on the author’s place in her family order. Other chapters take the form of text messages with her “derby wife” Rachel, or phone conversations with her mother.

In fact, it was via drunken text messages that the author finally came out to her mother. Although the book has a light tone on the whole, it doesn’t shy away from such serious matters.

The ending feels somewhat sudden, but in a way, Jones’s story has come full circle: she’s clean, out of the closet, and back home. This gives her memoir thematic unity and significant indie-movie-like charm.

REBECCA FOSTER (LGBTQ+ 2017)

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