

First Girl

Julie Aitcheson

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Julie Aitcheson's *First Girl* is a thrilling character-driven literary dystopia.

Gabi is a weak, sickly girl, tormented by bullies and friendless except for her grandmother. She also lives in a future time when science is obsolete and a Christian oligarchy rules. She finds that she must grapple with the past, her abilities, and the secret world that everyone—including her father—has kept from her, as well as with the loss of the person closest to her.

Gabi's life centers on prayer and adherence to strict laws imposed by the Church. Weighty questions about those in power develop, with subplots of betrayal, torture, and experiments painted against a backdrop of an otherwise normal life.

Descriptions are colorfully vivid with fancy diction that sometimes blurs together. The dystopian system that drives the plot is fascinating, if underexplored. The medical elements of the story aren't entirely sound, but the intrigue created through the revelation that Gabi's medication has only been harming her helps recenter the story. Some other scientific elements—Gabi finds herself fascinated with whales—lead to deviations within the plot.

Relationships between the characters are entertainingly developed and make room for emotional connection. Gabi finds herself uncertain about whom she can trust, though. Her father has kept secrets from her, she barely understands her brother anymore, and an old friend has become an enemy. Dialogue carries these relationships, with the desires of each coming clearly through.

There's much foreshadowing, which depletes some tension, but the story progresses in unique ways that leave much unforeseeable. Pacing fluctuates dramatically throughout the story—sometimes it is action-heavy, and other times it is intricately passive. These fluctuating peaks and valleys help emphasize the mysterious elements waiting within each chapter.

First Girl challenges dystopian conventions with its unique commentary on religious power.

TIA SMITH (March/April 2018)

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