

In the Mirror

Kaira Rouda

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Balancing sadness and humor, the retrospective tone of this novel is both therapeutic and affecting.

In the Mirror by Kaira Rouda is an emotion-packed novel about a mother facing terminal cancer. It is a nostalgic tribute to the things that really matter: family and friends.

Jennifer, the protagonist, is diagnosed with breast cancer right after her daughter's birth. The story, told from her perspective, shows how her illness deepens her appreciation for her husband, son, and daughter. Cancer is the main antagonist of the story, but a surprise encounter with an old flame also complicates the plot, upping the stakes for Jennifer and her family.

The story opens with Jennifer insisting on planning a party for herself, a sort of predeath funeral, as an outlet for her grief and gallows humor. Her planning propels her and keeps the story balanced between laughter and pathos. Humor is vital to keeping the book from being too painful and sentimental. Each chapter opens with a warning that mimics a medication label and foreshadows the events of the chapter; for example, "Warning: Intentional misuse can be harmful."

One of the strongest parts of the book is Jennifer's friendship with Ralph, another patient in treatment at Shady Valley, "a special all-suite, last-ditch-effort experimental facility for the sick and dying." Their relationship is endearing, as they face the loneliness of illness with heart and sarcasm. Relationships are the book's central focus. This low-action, minimal-exposition approach keeps the novel concentrated on the dizzyingly intense mix of humor, pain, and love that Jennifer feels.

Jennifer's first-person voice portrays the stress and confusion of her situation, keeping readers close to the emotion of the narrative. While Jennifer is a reliable narrator, her limited, stress-fueled perspective is wearying and restricting at times. It's hard to go through the pain and sickness with her and feel trapped in her mind while she's making mistakes.

The tone of the book is wholly retrospective, even when detailing present action—echoing Jennifer's view on life. The title and cover image (a woman looking in a rearview mirror) prepare readers for this backward look. The tone and imagery are fitting, but they don't give readers much room to hope for Jennifer's recovery. As a result, the tension doesn't grow throughout the book; conflicts unfold and resolve, but the real problems—cancer and death—are already so dire at the beginning of the book that there's no real suspense.

This novel is a perfect fit for readers who find a good cry to be therapeutic. The ache of the novel will be too much for many who've suffered the loss of loved ones, but for those who are in pain, who need a voice to echo what they feel, Jennifer has the feel of a friend.

MELISSA WUSKE (February 19, 2014)

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