

Irreplaceable You

Durga

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In Irreplaceable You, a young woman questions whether the relationship she wants is truly meant to be.

In Durga's romance novel *Irreplaceable You*, friends fight to remain platonic, though fate seems to have other plans.

Hana is from Japan and of mixed heritage. That she stands out from her peers causes her grief. She is studious and an introvert, so making friends is never easy, and the fact that she is bullied doesn't help. Hana's saving grace is her best friend, Jin. He's been there for her through tears and small triumphs.

After overhearing girls from her class lamenting about their love lives, Hana starts to desire intimacy with a significant other. Jin is the only boy she's close to, though, and he is not interested in changing his relationship with his best friend. Their relationship runs hot and cold across a span of several years. As Hana steps toward maturity and overcomes challenges, she wonders if Jin will always be there for her.

Most of the novel is devoted to Hana and Jin's relationship. They feed off of each other in a natural fashion, in both positive and negative respects, and their exchanges are convincing, though their dialogue tags repeat to the point of distraction. Evidence that they know intimate details about each other arises as they talk. Their conversations center the story, whose more narrative portions are devoted to describing scenes and the individuals who are talking. Hana and Jin don't themselves change much in the course of the story; shocking misfortunes befall them and others, but most characters are not developed beyond the circumstances they meet.

As Hana and Jin oscillate between what their hearts and minds want, they are increasingly driven to avoid commitment, or even to make decisions at all. Their indecision prolongs the narrative without need. Its pacing is slow; dramatic events are present, but only move the story from one catastrophe to the next. Some characters are placed in limbo for chapters on end; ultimately, nothing of consequence occurs for extended stretches. The question of whether Hana and Jin will end up together is always teased, but comes to lose its appeal; the resolution they reach is not surprising.

A high school drama with elements of a coming-of-age tale, *Irreplaceable You* is a maudlin romance focused on a painful side of love, whose heroine questions whether the relationship she wants is truly meant to be.

IAN DAILEY (June 2, 2021)

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