

Once Upon an Apple Martini

Kendal Taylor

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A wild heroine is at the center of this screwball, frenetic story.

Kendal Taylor's *Once Upon an Apple Martini* is a frenetic novel powered by copious amounts of alcohol and one woman's desperation to hang onto her job.

All Calyssa wants to do is settle down and prove that she's finally a "grown-up." But her big mouth has once again gotten her in trouble, and her precariously balanced life is about to come apart at the seams. With nothing left to lose, and probably too much booze in her system, Calyssa hijacks her girls' weekend in Las Vegas, forcing her girlfriends to redirect to Hawaii where her boss, the only one who can save her job, is vacationing. Calyssa might not like her job but she'll do anything, including blackmailing her boss and flying across the country with a fish in an old tequila bottle, not to get fired.

In a book that is filled to the brim with flawed characters, Calyssa holds the dubious honor of being the most morally flawed of them all. Rather than being a sympathetic, suffering protagonist who is struggling against an unjust world, Calyssa finds herself constantly defending her actions to her audience.

The narrative dives deep into Calyssa's psyche, revealing just how immature and selfish she actually is. She makes uncomfortable snap judgments about people of color and has some strange thoughts about her transgender friend, and these flaws are never whitewashed with excuses or apologies. This blunt portrayal, and Calyssa's stream-of-consciousness narration, are a window into the mind of a character whose history of selfishness is finally coming home to roost.

Once Upon an Apple Martini is a jam-packed novel whose frantic pacing is well suited for its boozy and impulsive protagonist. Characters, settings, and plot points appear without warning and disappear just as quickly. This extreme speed may jostle and befuddle some, but it does communicate just how out of control Calyssa's life is.

But the narrative is also sometimes a challenge to follow, and the out-of-control plot sometimes tumbles into confusion. The quick banter might work well in a snappy movie, but on the page it is tiring. It's not always clear who is talking or even what they're talking about. The sheer number of plotlines contributes to such moments of confusion, and some come to seem superfluous.

Once Upon an Apple Martini is a take-no-prisoners rapid-fire story in the vein of screwball rom-coms. Equally full of jokes and flinches, this is a story for readers tired of overly polished, quirky-but-relatable heroines.

CONSTANCE AUGUSTA A. ZABER (September 13, 2016)

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