

Perfectly Good White Boy

Carrie Mesrobian

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Pitch-perfect dialogue and narrative prose reveal teen culture and the journey of self-discovery.

Few adults have the spot-on sense of teenage culture that novelist Carrie Mesrobian has. Critically acclaimed for her candid young-adult novel, *Sex & Violence*, Mesrobian continues to study the late adolescent's mind in *Perfectly Good White Boy*, another frank and unflinching book that looks inside the cars, bedrooms, and hallways where high-school seniors make some of their most important decisions.

The senior in question is Sean Norwhalt, stuck in the only wreck of a rental his post-divorce mother can afford and plagued by puzzles about girls, his family, his future, and, oh yeah, girls.

Sex is front and center in Mesrobian's world, and Sean's encounters are relayed in the authentically blunt voice of a boy who will suffer any indignity to satisfy the needs of what he calls "The Horn." Much of the book is sexually explicit but never needlessly so. One of Mesrobian's strengths is her clear understanding of teenage hookup culture, its excesses, and its limits.

Teen culture comes through most clearly in the pitch-perfect dialogue—including texting—that infuses everything from setting to character to plot. Teens talk, even when they don't want to.

For instance, while Sean is feeling smug about seeing his ex-girlfriend on the sly, he finds himself telling a possible new love interest, Neece, all about it. "I was dying to say something. Do my blurting thing ... To explain why I jumped up and left her house like I had. To write it off like a booty call. Which it had been. Only I hadn't known it, I guess. God."

Sean's story doesn't follow a conventional dramatic story arc. While there are moving scenes, like when Sean reveals a buried memory to Neece and she comforts him all night, no sex involved, most of the big growth moments—Sean's decision to join the Marines, for instance—feel distant from the day-to-day world of text messages and beer parties. No doubt the effect is intentional in a story devoted to the disconnected feeling many teens have about the changes in their lives.

Perfectly Good White Boy does contain a few fairly violent scenes and emotionally mature discussions that might not be appropriate for young teens, but older high-school students won't be shocked by anything that comes up here.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Winter 2015)

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