

Sarah's Fall

Paula Riehle

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Sarah's Fall is a coming-of-age novel whose depictions of the special bonds formed between a group of childhood friends are absorbing.

In Paula Riehle's suspenseful novel *Sarah's Fall*, six teenagers' lives are forever altered following one tragic moment during their senior year.

During the summer before their senior year, Sarah, Jenny, Tori, Stacey, and Dalia made an effort to spend quality time together, knowing they would soon all go their separate ways. Their plans were complicated by the reemergence of Sarah's childhood friend, Ella, who caught Shawn's eye, though he was Dalia's on-again-off-again love interest. The girls' friendship was put to the test; Dalia was willing to go to great lengths to make sure Shawn was all hers—with fatal consequences.

It's been twenty years. Sarah, at thirty-eight, is on the verge of divorce. When she meets up with her estranged friends to open a time capsule, their gathering is fraught with revelations about what really happened that fateful year.

Sarah, Ella, and Dalia's perspectives make up the bulk of the book. They reveal their own motivations, building a sense of impending doom. But the girls are archetypal: Sarah is the good girl who leads a charmed life, facing very little conflict beyond her torn loyalties; Dalia is her opposite, a "bad girl" with an absent father and a neglectful mother. She has difficulty forming long-term goals, and her shortsightedness leads to dogged determination in the present. Ella is sympathetic as the new girl, but also likable in her own right. Questions about whether Dalia was ever a good friend to Sarah arise.

The book's suspenseful, climactic moment is foreshadowed during the women's reunion. Sarah's uncharacteristic, secretive behavior is compounded by the sinister setting, while Dalia's loosening grip on reality leads to intensity. But while doom looms over the story, the high school friendships themselves are detailed in beautiful, authentic terms. They are marked by frequent phone calls, meaningful conversations, gentle teasing, and inside jokes, while crushes, dates, and cheerleading competitions prove to be compelling side stories.

When the harrowing moment finally comes, it's sudden and brutal. It's also anticlimactic: after a short explanation of Sarah's life after high school, the story returns to the time capsule to provide Sarah with a sense of closure. Hints at major changes in her life are shared, but given the languorous amount of time spent in her teenage years, this quick wrap-up feels rushed.

With absorbing depictions of the special bonds formed between a group of childhood friends, *Sarah's Fall* is a coming-of-age novel that celebrates the power of forgiveness.

JENNA JAUREGUY (November 10, 2021)

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