

Self Helpless

Rachel Hall

CreateSpace (Mar 12, 2014)

\$12.99 (318pp)

978-1-4662-6638-4

The fun writing style and realistic, emotionally engaging characters in this genre-bending book will quickly grab even those uninspired by fashion.

In *Self Helpless*, Rachel Hall has created a fascinating hybrid between fiction and self-help with the unlikely backdrop of LA's couture fashion scene. Well written, compelling, and utterly enjoyable, this novel is a look at how genre conventions can be blurred and will appeal even to those who wouldn't typically reach for this type of book.

Jen, a self-conscious Orange County fashionista, begins her story in the self-help aisle in the local bookstore. Despite running a business and rubbing elbows with high society, she is wracked by self-doubt and constantly compares herself to her gorgeous and wealthy friend, Livia. Hidden behind the narcissism of high-society fashion, the narrative unravels to be unexpectedly complex and compelling. The pages soon feel like they're turning themselves.

The first few chapters are challenging, covering Jen's neuroses and issues with self-esteem through rambling inner dialogue and flighty jumps between topics. On her search for a new and lasting self-improvement mantra, she discusses other titles in the genre in perhaps too much detail. However, an intriguing but realistic story of love, betrayal, and personal growth will reward readers who push through. The narrative bounces from one looming personal disaster to another, and each chapter ends with a perfect cliffhanger that makes putting down the book quite difficult. It's easy to become completely wrapped up in Jen's life as she tries to balance work, friendships, and the hunt for the perfect guy.

While the story itself is engaging, the true beauty of the novel is the way it narrates a self-help book through the characters' own development. Throughout Jen's struggles, she relies on a short but helpful text that provides proverbial guidance through each catastrophe. Helpful phrases and paragraphs are reproduced through the narrative, bringing to the story an added dimension that will be refreshing to anyone who has found themselves unimpressed with the flaky repetition so often found in the self-help section. The author has a fantastic way of having characters learn and grow seamlessly with the plot, which makes the self-help undercurrents welcome and unobtrusive.

The book suffers from a choppy beginning and some long tangents on fashion minutiae, but the fun, light writing style and realistic, emotionally engaging characters will quickly grab even those uninspired by wardrobe. Those in the know will appreciate the detailed discussion of high-end brands and the role fashion plays in the lives of the well-to-do. *Self Helpless* is definitely worth sticking with, as much for the story as for its ability to blur the lines between genres.

ERIC ANDERSON (April 14, 2014)

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