

Sparks Off You

Anita Felicelli

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Full of lyricism and emotion, *Sparks Off You* depicts the unraveling of a young woman as she desperately struggles to navigate a world that doesn't seem to have a place for her. Complex characters and effective, often evocative description set the novel apart from the standard coming-of-age story.

Anita Felicelli's main character, Julie Randeria, is a gifted Indian-American girl with a love of painting, but whose sensitive nature makes it hard to simply fit in. Perhaps like many teens who are finding themselves, "when she saw herself in the mirror, she thought her body not only didn't reflect her insides, it didn't seem to fit in the outside world." The world in general, the idea of normalcy, and especially people, including her sister Maya, overwhelm Julie, and as she advances in age, her thin grasp on her own personality, and eventually reality itself, weakens.

The novel peeks into Julie's life at formative moments. Her exposure to others' depression and drug use influences her own. Early rejection translates to later vulnerability. Most markedly, her mental state slowly devolves as she succumbs to mental illness.

This progression can, at times, feel a bit directionless, as the book focuses more on character evolution than a fast paced or complex plot. The chapter breaks in particular can be oddly placed, though at times the irregularity serves a distinct narrative purpose. Overall, however, the pieces come together to illustrate a slow and realistic journey that elevates the typical teen read.

Felicelli's use of language also sets her apart. She has a talent for translating a character's mental and emotional state into concrete imagery. Julie, in turns, feels "like her organs were being emptied out, like something had gutted a dirty black hole in the center of her," or "like she was buried in moths," her depression "made up of a hundred small instances of horror." This talent becomes particularly effective as Julie's mental state deteriorates into chaos.

These types of descriptions are just one way Felicelli creates such compelling characters. She delves into the minds and history of her secondary characters as well as Julia. Chapters from the viewpoints of Ramesh, Julie's father, Maya, and Julie's best friend offer parallel stories of people finding their way through a difficult world. These snippets offer insight and a contrasting alternative to Julie's path. Each character is so layered readers are left wanting to know even more about them.

The protagonist's pain is palpable in the novel, and as a whole the story deals with some elements that may be inappropriate or a bit dark for younger teens. Older teens and adults, however, will appreciate some of the more universal feelings Julie experiences.

While this unique story doesn't end with a complete happily-ever-after ending, there is something even more poignant and realistic about the resolution that ultimately speaks about inner strength and leaves off with a hopeful note.

ALICIA SONDHI (September 12, 2012)

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