

State of Grace

Hilary Badger

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This novel about a girl awakening as she questions the cult she's grown up in is full of wisdom and potential.

In a paradisaical, hyper-sexualized cult created by Dot (a goddess figure), Wren spends her days hooking up, freewheeling in the lagoon, and picking fruit. Without questioning existence, or the story laid out in the Books of Dot, she experiences visions of a past life that kindle new doubts. Hilary Badger's dystopian *State of Grace* loosely parallels Eden, with a corporate twist involving mass drugging. The journey of a guileless teen, who confronts the truth about the clinical trial she signed on for, raises disturbing questions on the blind acceptance of faith, dependence, and guilt.

Wren's world begins unraveling when fellow teen and resident Blaze challenges her perceptions. When a child from the "outside" world intrudes, she must decide whether to continue believing in Dot or accept the elaborate lie. A fight that evokes *The Lord of the Flies* divides the teens. In a whirlwind finale, Wren and Blaze recover the traumatic memories that had lead them into Dot's cult in search of refuge. The intricate world-building results in a fantasy that blends pharmaceuticals and greed in emotional ways.

Narrated from Wren's perspective, the voice recreates teen-speak, using words such as "totally," "obviously," "naturally," and "right?" At times, the repetitive wavering between confidence and hesitance makes her character appear vacuous. Slow pacing at the beginning, a hurried introduction of new elements toward the end—including a rescue group that allows Blaze and Wren to resolve their immediate problems—and a reliance on familiar ideas, from a sexually abusive priest to an evil corporation, keep the work from coming together completely.

The plot presents mature topics such as violence and rape resulting from drug-induced rage and voyeurism in the cyberworld, without detailing their consequences. Fanatical religion, which pits the Dotly against the un-Dotly, also lacks subtlety, though it helps explain Wren's reluctance to leave the comforts of a life that promises happiness in exchange for obedience. The most poignant message, that self-blame for past mistakes doesn't have to mean being unlovable, is a worthy one.

KAREN RIGBY (Fall 2015)

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