



The Bad Dream Notebook

Linda Dahl

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The Bad Dream Notebook is a thoughtfully crafted entrée into the dramatic, messy, and nightmarish world of substance abuse.

Linda Dahl's novel *The Bad Dream Notebook* follows an artist's harrowing journey through a series of catastrophes that send her comfortable suburban life off the rails. The book deftly tackles a heavy subject and sheds light on the multiple crises that addiction injects into peoples' personal lives and on the contemporary opioid drug epidemic.

Erica is married to a successful, sexy art director, John. When John receives a terminal diagnosis, their daughter Mona spirals out of control, taking a dangerous turn into opioids and heroin. Even the family dog adds to the chaos, responding to the changes in his home by peeing on the rugs.

Erica is the caretaker of her increasingly fragmented family. Her hard-won sobriety is endangered, too, as even a good night's sleep eludes her. She attempts to ward off her nightly terrors with "a sleeping pill, an antianxiety pill, three pillows, a melancholy Scandinavian crime novel, and two squares of chocolate," but the formula fails, night after night. She starts documenting her vivid and surreal nightmares in a notebook, snippets of which begin each chapter.

Those dream summaries are among the most vibrant passages in the novel, succinctly reflecting the anxieties and stresses of Erica's real-life nightmare. Some are even darkly comic, as when she dreams that she is served a restaurant meal of a pair of human lips garnished with parsley.

Her notebook serves as a touchstone during her journey through a grim time, ultimately allowing her to find her way back to art and reclaim her old identity. Another character adds bad dream vignettes to the later chapters of the novel, a device that helps to explain both of their inner motivations and desires.

Erica is a complex lead character, with a flawed personality and fits of self-pity that make it hard to completely empathize with her. She is self-absorbed, relating her situation to those of the Guatemalan immigrants who work in her community, and her comments regarding them are discordantly insensitive.

Mona is another prickly personality whose lying and manipulative behavior also don't make it easy to root for her. Still, the narrative pointedly expresses that deep inside every "junkie" is somebody's beloved child.

Notes about addiction and recovery have an authoritative feel. Jarring scenes in rehab treatment centers, and through Erica and Mona's dramatic interactions, are not always easy to read, but they are illuminating, written with clear-eyed detail and dialogue.

The Bad Dream Notebook is not a light concoction, but it is a thoughtfully crafted entrée into the dramatic, messy, and nightmarish world of substance abuse.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (November 27, 2017)

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