

The Garden of Second Chances

Mona Alvarado Frazier

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An undocumented teenager is charged with manslaughter and works to remake her life in Mona Alvarado Frazier's searing novel *The Garden of Second Chances*.

At seventeen, Juana is sent to a Southern California juvenile correctional facility for killing her husband, which she denies having done. Separated from her baby, Katrina, whom she left in the care of relatives, she settles into her tough circumstances. As Juana's longings twist with regrets, she learns about her fellow inmates: some are Chicanas, some are gang members. Jester, a leader, bullies Juana about her Mexican background, shows her the ropes, and reveals surprising glimpses of what another life might have allowed her, including uses of her artistic talent.

Juana's rough encounters include territorial fights in which the rules shift. Still, Juana forms friendships that help. Learning the harsh stories of her fellow inmates calms a few of her fears: she realizes that the girls are more alike than they are different. When they expose their vulnerabilities during crises, it prompts sobering empathy.

Amid concerns about her survival, memories reveal Juana's family situation. There's a realistic portrayal of past partner abuse, both of the violence itself and of reprieves from it. Juana, who was once naïve about her circumstances, displays savvy in protecting herself from Jester. She learns more English, too, helping her to advocate for herself. This becomes critical when Katrina's custody is threatened. She also begins a garden—a hopeful metaphor for how life grows, and proves resilient, even in prison.

Candid when it comes to relationships, immigration issues, and the harms that young women endure and inflict upon others, *The Garden of Second Chances* is an affecting novel in which an at-risk youth finds the courage to move past her mistakes.

KAREN RIGBY (May / June 2023)

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