

The Queen of Steeplechase Park

David Ciminello

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In David Ciminello's hilarious novel *The Queen of Steeplechase Park*, an Italian American girl's personality is as big as her heart—and her appetite.

In 1930s New Jersey, Bella makes sure everyone knows her name. Her beauty, wit, and incredible talent in the kitchen elevate her to queen status in her close-knit Italian Catholic neighborhood, where conversations are laced with flamboyant humor and people address each other by their full names, letting out ardent refrains of “holy cannoli!” But Bella's insecurities drive her to pull away from those who care for her. Raising her younger brother in a home with a catatonic mother and an abusive father, Bella balances school, chores, and her social life.

Then Bella falls in love with gorgeous Francis and becomes pregnant at fifteen. A series of tragedies and fateful decisions follow: she's coerced into giving away her baby, is sterilized without her consent, and runs away to join a sideshow. Bella ends up burlesque dancing on Coney Island, where her found family of circus performers propels her to seek redemption.

Bella is a loud, brash, and lovable heroine. On Coney Island, her bold nature reasserts itself. She shows deep loyalty to her queer outcast friends too. But her hopeless romanticism is a reminder that she is still a teenager.

Humor interchanges with heartbreak as Bella grows wise beyond her years. She begs for her lost baby with palpable desperation and claws her way back into lost friendships. She fears that Francis will no longer want her when he learns about her pregnancy, her sterilization, and her promiscuity, but their passionate love is the constant, thrumming heartbeat of the book.

A girl heals with the powers of dancing and Italian meatballs in *The Queen of Steeplechase Park*, a heartrending, humorous novel about friendship amid despair.

AIMÉE JODOIN (May / June 2024)

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