

The Secrets We Hold

Keira Forde

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The young adult novel The Secrets We Hold rides emotional highs as two outwardly mismatched teenagers try to grow past their mistakes.

A transfer student faces intense bullying in Keira Forde's cinematic young adult novel *The Secrets We Hold*.

Ivy is one of nine children. She and her older brother Tyler are often tasked with taking care of their younger siblings while their mother struggles to support them all. They've just moved across England, escaping a scandal in Ivy's past that's only alluded to for most of the book.

In her new school, Ivy becomes immediate best friends with a fellow bookworm, Martha, and immediate enemies with Eli, who doesn't think poor students should be allowed in his upper-crust school. She also runs afoul of Eli's fiancée, Haila, who assists Eli in bullying her. Only a dramatic attack seems capable of bridging the social divide between Ivy and her primary tormentor.

The book is part teenage drama, part wish-fulfillment fantasy in the form of crossed social boundaries. Its characters fit comfortable archetypes—the nerd, the bookworm, the jock, the popular party host—though most are not fleshed out far beyond these roles. There are slight deviations: Martha comes out to Ivy midway through, and is received with warmth and acceptance; and that Eli and Haila are planning a marriage while still in secondary school is a plot surprise that generates some interest.

But Ivy is an uneasy heroine. The fact that she is defined most by her smarts is conveyed in a loud manner, including with her first-day decision to educate a history teacher on the nuances of seventeenth-century British classism. Her diction during such rants is formal and unconvincing, and her early dismissal of her new classmates, whom she deems “idiots” and “defaults” on sight, is off-putting. The final revelation of her dark secret is scandalous and shocking, but further undermines audience sympathy for her.

While the novel is careful about establishing its value system, in which bullying and classism are frowned upon and underage drinking has severe consequences, its narration is overdramatic. People scream and growl and screech out their conversations, and forever friendships formed one moment are likely to disintegrate in the next. Coupled with the book's clichéd metaphors, the effect is a story that relies on manufactured tension for its forward movement, and whose bait-and-switch conclusion is a betrayal of what precedes it. Still, the book's portrayals of secondary school drama are apt, and its characters' asides result in some amusing insights, as when Ivy refers to Facebook as “Instagram: Dinosaur Edition.”

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May 25, 2021)

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