

Twisted

Lola Smirnova

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Twisted takes a brash and unflinching look at the nuanced, complex workings of the sex trade.

Sex workers are among the few groups still subject to open intolerance in Western societies; few other occupations are so stereotypically represented in popular culture. But not so in Lola Smirnova's *Twisted*, a fast-paced novel that treats its characters with an uncommon dignity.

The protagonists are three sisters from Ukraine who travel abroad to work in the lucrative sex industry in order to achieve goals that, due to economic decline, wouldn't be possible otherwise. They are intelligent and nuanced, and, most importantly, they have agency. They are not tricked into joining the industry and are confident about their choices, and although they don't always love their work (who does?) and must navigate the risks it exposes them to, they make the best of it. They are neither wide-eyed innocents nor immoral sirens. They are refreshingly empowered and human.

The youngest sister, Julia, has come after hearing tales of quick money from the two older women who'd already spent time there. Thin and blond, outgoing and assertive, "Jul" excels at her work and soon outsells the other women regularly. But she has also discovered a taste for recreational drugs, which render her a liability for her employers. Her spiral into drug dependence, leading her to take on more and more dangerous work, threatens to descend into caricature at every turn but is saved from that fate by Smirnova's dedication to keeping the narrative focused on Jul's resourcefulness and self-awareness.

Twisted takes a brash and unflinching look at the inner workings of some areas of the sex trade, examining, usually without judgment, not only the "traders'" motivations for working but also the clients' reasons for buying. It is up front and direct; Smirnova thankfully avoids the guileless euphemisms that writers with less comfort about sex and sex work use in their sex scenes. It also explores the business with a sensitivity and respect—though not approval—that is rare. The story is paced steadily, never lingers in melodrama, and can easily be read in one sitting.

Its dramatic climax shapes the book into one particular kind of narrative about sex work, but the nuanced and complex experiences that the protagonists and their coworkers have throughout tell a wider range of truths about the industry. As with any job, there are as many realities as there are workers, and *Twisted* does a service to a broader conversation about sex work by eschewing stereotypes and representing a range of these realities with respect.

SARAH STEWART (July 8, 2014)

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