

What Kind of Girl

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When Maya reveals to the school principal that her boyfriend, Mike, has been hitting her, North Bay Academy fractures down its center, forcing Maya and those around her to come to terms with cracks within themselves. Shifting perspectives and direct, first-person prose make *What Kind of Girl* an immersive experience of the isolation of adolescence, where teenagers wobble on the precipice of adulthood, their struggles mature while they are considered not.

Chapters are headed with labels such as “The Girlfriend,” “The Anxious Girl,” and “The Bulimic,” revealing different characters and the facets that make them up. Shame and secrets are prevalent themes, and the spiral of contradictions that challenge domestic violence victims are unfiltered through Maya’s point of view. She explains that Mike “isn’t like those guys in the movies,” the bad guys who send their wives to the hospital. Mike only hit her twice, she insists, most of his violence enacted as small hurts—“gray, instead of black and white.” The push and pull within her is agonizing; her rebirth is jubilant.

Maya’s best friend has a unique perspective on the helpless nature of finding the right thing to do in a situation that is all wrong. Fighting personal battles related to anxiety, self-harm, and a messy breakup with her girlfriend, Junie questions her every move, trying to strike the right balance between aggressive action and walking on eggshells. Only through the shedding of their respective masks do the teens find salvation and support.

Though inspiring in its takedown of dating violence and myths perpetuated by rape culture, the novel is more an invitation than a call to action—an invitation to examine biases, to check on the well-being of friends, to confide rather than hide. *What Kind of Girl* bears testament to the resilience of teenagers’ spirits and the galvanizing power of friendship.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (January / February 2020)

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