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Foreword Review YOUNG ADULT FICTION

What Momma Left Me

Renée Watson
Bloomsbury (Jan 8, 2019)
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A coming-of-age story inundated with grief, trauma, and uncertainty, Renée Watson's *What Momma Left Me* is a heartbreaking and intense young adult novel.

Thirteen-year-old Serenity finds herself in emotional turmoil as she tries to cope with the sudden death of her mother and the unknown whereabouts of her abusive father. Sent to live with her religious maternal grandparents after the tragedy, Serenity and her brother start anew at a different school and church. She meets new friends, develops crushes, and slowly begins to discover who she is.

But then Serenity's past reveals itself: the obscured nature of her mother's death, the anger in her little brother's heart, and the weight of an untold secret that inhibits closure. Her new friends possess messy, complicated lives of their own, especially as they grow and come into contact with suffering, first loves, and loss.

What Momma Left Me is a startlingly realistic look at young adult life. A scene at a slumber party is so tangible that it, in particular, reads like nonfiction. Through Serenity's voice and snippets from her personal journal writings, the novel deftly conveys raw and accessible emotions.

Thoughtful character development turns stereotypes on their head: the drug-dealing bad boy, the religious grandparents, and the sidekick best friend all evolve into layered and complicated beings. This is especially true of Serenity herself, who moves through a particularly stirring arc of acceptance and growth that will bring tears to your eyes.

A decade after its first publication, *What Momma Left Me* still contains notable representation for all types of characters. Serenity gives young black girls, especially those dealing with loss or trauma, a compassionate hero to look up to. A tear-jerking, cathartic conclusion ties up the story with a perfect denouement.

MYA ALEXICE (January/February 2019)

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