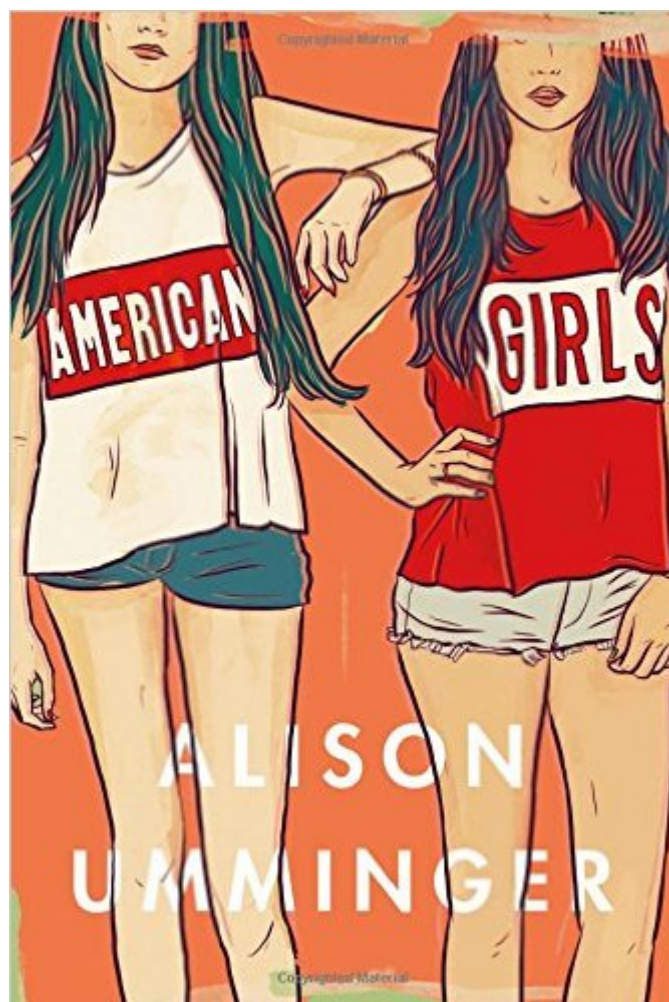


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American Girls: A Novel



Synopsis

A bittersweet, honest, and widely acclaimed YA coming-of-age novel that distills honest truths about American girlhood. Anna is a fifteen-year-old girl slouching toward adulthood, and she's had it with her life at home. So Anna "borrows" her stepmom's credit card and runs away to Los Angeles, where her half-sister takes her in. But LA isn't quite the glamorous escape Anna had imagined. As Anna spends her days on TV and movie sets, she engrosses herself in a project researching the murderous Manson girls—and although the violence in her own life isn't the kind that leaves physical scars, she begins to notice the parallels between herself and the lost girls of LA, and of America, past and present. In Anna's singular voice, we glimpse not only a picture of life on the B-list in LA, but also a clear-eyed reflection on being young, vulnerable, lost, and female in America—in short, on the B-list of life. Alison Umminger writes about girls, violence, and which people society deems worthy of caring about, which ones it doesn't, in a way not often seen in teen fiction.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I'm an old guy--75--retired professor of English, who actually remembers the Manson Helter-Skelter stuff when it was permeating the culture, but if you want to read this excellent book as a primer on Mansonism you will miss the point. I read it nonstop during an eight-hour car trip from having seen my family (including my daughter, of course), and the portrait of this Anna rang completely true to me. Well, true in the way Holden Caulfield rings true to me . . . Ms. Umminger's book is loaded with threads of family and American culture, and she is an author who knows how not to leave them lying around loose. The characters are memorable, the family relationships instantly recognizable, and

the prose . . . well, as my professional academic work was primarily in contemporary poetry, I must say the prose is nowhere "prosaic." Smart, often funny, but always just right. I said I read it nonstop, didn't I? . . .

American Girls is a book that leaves the reader wrestling with and thinking about several challenging ideas. Anna, the main character, is complex and sometimes not even likable, but it is fascinating to watch her grapple with questions of why the Manson girls and their looks get more attention than the victims and how to love the maddeningly imperfect people in your life. Umminger is constantly forcing Anna (and the reader) to look at the people she encounters, whether it's members of the Hollywood B-club, the Manson girls, her family, LA, or herself and somehow make sense of all their internal and external contradictions. The book is definitely edgy and dark at times - the nature of the subject matter is not always easy (everything from the Manson murders to her sister's dysfunction), but it's not sensationalized - it is there to be examined in all its tragedy and complexity. The author's writing style provided several opportunities to stop and just appreciate how she had turned a phrase, and there were times that I had to stop reading to work through my own thoughts and feelings from an incredibly messy question about people or culture that Anna falls into almost stumblingly and is able to ask but not really answer. A book that will be appreciated best by older teens and adults who enjoy YA literature.

I can already tell this is going to be a hard review to write. That's always the case though with books that blow me away so completely; I can never seem to find the words. Granted, rendering me speechless is a tough feat in and of itself and one that is reserved solely for the books with everything going for them. Even better is when I can give the distinction to a rare five star read (my first of this year), such as Alison Umminger's AMERICAN GIRLS. It's hard for me to pin down what exactly I found so intoxicating about protagonist Anna's journey, but it's safe to say I was hooked. Having read it in a mere two days, it seemed like my every waking moment was dedicated only to the consumption of this fascinating story. This may give the impression that Umminger's debut is so packed with action and suspense that I was hanging on the content of every page. While the latter is true, AMERICAN GIRLS is a rare breed of contemporary YA that is quiet in all manners of its presentation. From characters to atmosphere to the underlying message, this story relies heavily on readers to draw their own conclusions. Perhaps the aspect of AMERICAN GIRLS most benefited by this unique distance from conventional storytelling was the Manson Girls subplot. It would have been easy for the oft-sensationalized story

of Charles Manson to quickly go off the rails, descending into a portrayal of madness and hysteria. Instead, Umminger paints a portrait of "regular" girls at the wrong place (California) in the wrong time (60s) that perfectly mirrors Anna's own look at modern violence and the American dream. At its core, though, AMERICAN GIRLS is not in any way, shape, or form about the Manson family. It's merely a jumping off point for Anna's story to be set in motion. Going along with that train of thought, let me say how utterly fantastic the characters are in this book. I'm a sucker for melancholy introspection and dynamic relationships, both of which AMERICAN GIRLS delivers in spades. For starters, Anna is an amazing voice to read this particular story through. She's deeply cynical, a little lost and mostly a good person --- a perfect embodiment of the story's soul if ever I saw one. Not only is she hilarious (this book is also wicked funny, by the way) but all around refreshing, as well. She has a lot of deep thoughts about a lot of deep things (in a decidedly non-precocious way) which really got me thinking about the topics Umminger presented. Much like how Anna comes to realize that anyone could wind up a Manson girl, the real genius to our protagonist's characterization is the sheer "everyman" nature of it. Because, at its essence, AMERICAN GIRLS is all about coming of age. Speaking of characters who could stand to grow up a bit; we have Anna's big sister and wannabe actress, Delia, and the cautionary tale that is Olivia Taylor. Both are struggling to find what comes after the prospect of youth and beauty has faded, and present interesting takes on the underbelly of LA's glittery allure. Though the two aren't always heavy on the page time, each play an integral role in establishing a multifaceted, dynamic relationship with Anna. Olivia in particular captured my attention, as she exemplifies the other side of the tabloid fodder that is washed up celebrity has-beens. I never would have guessed I could muster up so much sympathy for a chronic drug abuser, serial shopaholic and all around morally questionable human, but leave it to Umminger to surprise me yet again. Actually, that's what a lot of AMERICAN GIRLS is all about. Tackling the personal side of a story that doesn't fit the bill LA needs to be perceived as a city of dreams. Each character (there are several more worth noting) fulfills a kind of Hollywood stereotype and further works to build the palpable atmosphere present throughout. The best kind of books are those where the ending utilizes all the storytelling aspects I mentioned above, weaving them into a heartrending conclusion. Such is the case with AMERICAN GIRLS. Alison Umminger proves her prowess as a debut author, taking all the rules traditionally assigned to contemporaries, and turning them on their heads. I eagerly await her next novel, and until that happens I recommend you read this one. If nothing else, let this be your dark horse for #1 book 2016. Reviewed by Megan B.

It took some fits and starts, thanks to an overly busy summer, but I finally finished this fantastic first novel. It manages to be profoundly insightful about the macro (America, the 60s, L.A., pop culture) and the micro (one teenage girl's life, standing in for our own lives in many ways) all at once. Plus, it's really funny and entertaining. I loved it.

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