Sundress Reads: Review of *Skinny Vanilla Crisis*

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When your marriage is suddenly on the line and you are forced to start over, what do you do? Colleen Alles addresses this question in her debut novel *Skinny Vanilla Crisis* (Atmosphere Press, 2020), which follows Holden Averett as he struggles to navigate life while on a trial-run separation with his wife of eighteen years. When Sophia asks Holden to move out for the summer so they can reevaluate their marriage, Holden has no choice but to take up temporary residence at a questionable hotel and start working at a local coffee shop for some extra money. While the position eases some of his financial stress, Holden's already-complicated situation gets even more confusing when he meets his new coworker, Lila, a former student of his ten years prior. Both Holden and Sophia begin to doubt their relationship as concerns are brought to question, and the two must choose between working through their differences for their family or moving on with other people.

Skinny Vanilla Crisis is both witty and real, focusing on deep topics such as marital problems with authenticity and humor interwoven with more serious moments. Since the story is primarily character driven, the tone of Alles' writing reflects Holden's personality and mentality. Holden's thoughts start off as self-deprecating, with sarcastic, dry jokes included in emotional scenes to mirror his tendency to deflect responsibility. However, the more Holden grows as a character, the more mature and deep the tone becomes, which Alles uses as a way to further establish Holden's character, as well as subtly depict the growth that he experiences.

The first half of the novel focuses on Holden's struggle to adapt to his new life while apart from his wife for the first time in decades. While men are oftentimes written as strong or unemotional characters in literature, Alles highlights Holden's vulnerability. Her realistic portrayal of human emotion through Holden's character is a refreshing perspective to read from since it opposes the traditional tropes of the romance genre. Alles also does not shy away from focusing on Holden's negative feelings and how his emotions affect his actions, giving his character more depth. The showcasing of Holden's hurt makes him more real, his blindsided confusion written so clearly that it can resonate with any reader regardless of whether they can relate or not.

Alles balances this vulnerability with additional focus on Holden's weaknesses and flaws in the second half of the story. Alles does not establish a "right" or "wrong" person in this situation; instead she gives equal responsibility to both Holden and Sophia. Alles does not paint them as perfect characters; both Holden and Sophia have their own flaws that affect the relationship in different ways. One of the strongest passages in the novel is when Holden acknowledges his own fault in the relationship and what he needs to say to Sophia, stating: "I had what felt like a million things rattling around in my brain that I wanted to tell her. *I think you're right, Soph*, I wanted to say. We got way off track. I'm sorry I made you feel so alone for so long. Let's start

rebuilding. Okay? From where we are today" (223). The shift in his mindset from the beginning of the novel to the end shows that his way of approaching the situation has changed. This growth reflects a struggle that many people experience when in a similar situation, which is what makes Alles' novel so impactful. The reality of their inevitable marital problems encourages readers to put their actions into perspective and even evaluate their own relationship dynamics.

Skinny Vanilla Crisis is not only a story of two people coming back together and resolving to overcome their problems, but also of Holden's self-discovery. The journey that Holden goes on is eye-opening, inspiring readers to consider their relationships with those that matter most to them. While the novel does not wrap up with a perfect bow like other books with a romance plotline do, it ends on an optimistic note that is fitting for both the story and the situation. The ending emphasizes the message behind Holden's story, which is that you should never give up fighting for those you love, and that sometimes additional work and self-reflection is necessary to keep relationships healthy. An enjoyable read with an important theme, *Skinny Vanilla Crisis* is sure to leave a long-lasting impact on any reader as they are inspired to examine the role they play in their relationships.

Skinny Vanilla Crisis is available at Atmosphere Press

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