

## Wither

Lauren DeStefano

Reviewed by: Rina Guo, 17

Star Teen Book Reviewer of *Be the Star You Are!* Charity

[www.bethestaryouare.org](http://www.bethestaryouare.org)

In the dystopian future of Eastern United States, the life expectancy of every person has dwindled to the early 20s after a ravaging virus claims most of humanity and its former order and glory. Children are mostly orphaned and the streets are never safe. Rhine, a sixteen-year-old girl, gets kidnapped and sold as a bride to a wealthy man, forcing her to leave behind her twin brother Rowan, who is her last family member alive. Rhine becomes pampered and married to House Governor Linden along with two other kidnapped girls, who soon become Rhine's "sister wives". Although her living conditions are more lavish than anything she's ever experienced and her husband and mansion servants are nothing but patient and kind to her, Housemaster Vaughan, her strict father-in-law and a prominent doctor, seems to have suspiciously cruel intentions for Rhine. When Rhine uncovers a horrible secret about Vaughan's medical experiments in the name of finding a cure for the virus, Rhine realizes that she needs to escape the confines of the mansion and find her brother, before it's too late.

This novel is suitable for readers age 15-20. It includes some suggestive content and hints of prostitution and misogyny. In the story setting, the women seem to be at a high risk of human trafficking and some polygamous customs seem to be unconsented by the brides. Also, since the life expectancy is so low in the story, the "sister wives" are actually around 13-19 years old when they are expected to marry and bear children. It might be helpful to keep this in mind before starting the book.

I was really captivated by this book. The plot was really engaging, and the characters were surprisingly complex. *Wither* is the first book of the *Chemical Garden* trilogy and I was so immersed in this book, that I actually finished the entire series within two days. After finishing this book, it really left me aching and desperate for more. After finishing the trilogy, I feel that *Wither* was probably the best book out of the series. The plot was more organized, and "stable" compared to the other novels. Something I really appreciate is the fact that Lauren DeStefano spent a great deal of time to develop the minor and side characters in the story as well. We were able to see complicated sides of various characters, especially the other sister wives, who develop a special bond with Rhine. I find it fascinating that Rhine is able to read the other characters really well. For example, at first, Rhine has a deep hatred for her husband, Linden, because she never wanted to be his wife in the first place. But over time, she begins to see Linden for more of his character, as well as his faults and flaws. At first, she saw him more as her "captor", but then she realizes, he himself is a prisoner of his own mansion as well. I loved seeing this shift in characterization.

Out of the entire series, this book seems to be the most "ideal" or "utopian". The novel mostly delved into romance throughout the entire book, and since Rhine is stuck in the mansion all day, she forgets the terrors and greater issues in the world beyond the mansion. It might be a bit disappointing for readers to know that *Wither* doesn't delve into the science fiction aspect as much (as the third book does) and some of the context and setting is less established and unclear in this novel. So although the times seem dire and desperate, Rhine has the fortune of living in a kind of blissful ignorance while the obvious health issues and environmental problems wreak havoc on the rest of the world. And thus, the story has less focus on these major problems, and

has way more focus on the romance aspect of the story. To be fair though, I think the author did a great job on the romance aspect, and I like that the love triangles were compelling and exciting. Another thing I realized is that although a lot of the side characters seem to have distinct personalities, Rhine's own voice didn't seem as compelling and powerful, as the author may have intended. The lack of stability and foundation in her character seems most prominent in the second book, but in this novel as well, I was a little disappointed that she didn't shine so much on her own or have any distinctly unique qualities or characteristic traits.

Aside from this though, I enjoyed this book a lot. Something I noticed after finishing the series, is that the entire picture of the story is largely unfinished and unclear unless you read the entire series in order. The ending may not seem super conclusive or satisfying, because all three books are basically one long story divided into three, and each new book will start where the last left off. So after finishing, you may be a little disappointed that there were some unanswered questions and unaddressed issues, but I can assure that they will probably be explained in the later novels. I would recommend *Wither* to fans of dystopia, science fiction and romance.

**Recommended Titles:**

Fever by Lauren DeStefano

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

The Selection by Kiara Cass

Uglies by Scott Westerfeld

Keturah and Lord Death by Martine Leavitt