

To All the Boys I've Loved Before

Author: Jenny Han

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To All the Boys I've Loved Before is a book that isn't quite sure what to do with itself. Judging from the sappy title, one might expect a weepy melodramatic romance. While Jenny Han's novel is absolutely of a romantic nature, it is also a mishmash of other genres: light-hearted humor, teenaged coming-of-age, and family saga. Surprisingly enough, while reading I was reminded of the comedy of manners written by Jane Austen. Much like Austen, Han intermingles social and class themes with wit and swoon-worthy romance. However, unlike Austen's seminal works *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, *To All the Boys* lacks the in-depth character development that made protagonists like Elizabeth Bennett and Elinor Dashwood so sympathetic.

The story sounds like something out of a 1980s John Hughes movie starring Molly Ringwald. Lara Jean Song-Covey is a plucky but innocent high schooler and hopeless romantic. She has been nursing a crush on her perfect older sister Margo's ex-boyfriend Josh for the past few years. Too soft-skinned to confront either Josh or her sister, Lara turns to the pen and paper as a respite from her warring heart and mind. Whenever Lara is madly in love and trying not to be, she pens a letter to her misbegotten lover. These aren't declarations of love; rather, they are good-byes. She doesn't mail them. Rather, Lara holds onto these notes as reminders of the crushing weight of falling in love with the wrong person. So, as you can imagine, chaos breaks

out when these deeply personal letters are mailed to the recipients. Amid the ensuing screwball events, Lara finds herself struggling to pick up the pieces of the catastrophe all the while contemplating her relationship with Josh, her sister, and a few other boys she may or may not still love.

To All the Boys I've Loved Before decides that it wants to be a love story, and that may just be its downfall.. Not wanting to threaten her friendship with Josh, Lara decides to fake a relationship with another love letter recipient: school heartthrob Peter Kavinsky. Kavinsky and Lara share a Darcy-and-Elizabeth style banter, but lack the fiery chemistry. Han expects the audience to believe that Lara would throw her apparently undying love for Josh under the bus swiftly after meeting the dashing but egomaniacal Kavinsky. She never fully fleshes out the relationship or makes us sympathize their dilemma. Thankfully, the love story is only the flimsy icing on top of the deeper, truer heart of the story. The moments most emotionally resonant do not include Peter or Josh or any men at all; they are shared between the Song sisters. The relationship between Lara, Margot, and their youngest sister Kitty is heartwarming and honest, reflecting the tenderness and strife of sisterhood. Han excellently captures the emotional roller coaster that so often comes with living in a household full of young women who love each other, but nonetheless feud constantly. It is these hilariously raw moments that embody the whimsical slice-of-life *To All the Boys* strives for. Yet, it is Lara's love life that continuously dogs the story down.

While undercooked and messy in parts, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* can be praised for its diversity. Lara and her sisters are half-Korean, raised by a white father after their mother passed away years prior. It is notable that the few sparing mentions of Lara's struggles with her

racial identity are some of the most compelling in the story. Yet, while fulfilling in some parts and dreadfully underwritten in others, Lara's optimistic tale of teenage love and life is the kind of sugary sweet and superficial summer read you cannot help but enjoy. With its few mild sexual references and strong language, I would recommend this book for girls age 13 and up looking for a quick and entertaining read. However, much like an ice cream cone left out in the sunshine for too long, the substance in this book melts away quite quickly. If you think about the plot or characters for too long, you'll soon find a puddle in your hands.

Book Recommendations

Anna and the French Kiss by Stephanie Perkins

The Summer I Turned Pretty by Jenny Han

Eleanor and Park by Rainbow Rowell

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares

For readers sixteen and older looking for a more mature high school story:

Hopeless by Colleen Hoover