

Keeping the Moon

Author: Sarah Dessen

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The awkward phase supposedly happens to every person during their adolescence, but any teenager who has truly felt out of place in their body will say that their experience was definitely worse than their peers-or at least far more cringeworthy. Perhaps that is the brutal truth; while some teens can shed their post-pubescent awkwardness and transition into adulthood with ease, others remain stuck in a muddle of cheap hair dye and unfortunate piercings for years. “Growing up isn’t a race,” many parents are fond of saying. Yet, every floundering teen surpassed by their entire classroom will disagree. Sometimes, life is a race. And it is never fun to be the loser. Colie, the protagonist of Sarah Dessen’s coming-of-age fable *Keeping the Moon*, tries her best not to care about the bullies who hound her relentlessly. She knows she isn’t as pretty or as thin as the other girls. She knows she doesn’t wear the right clothes or say the right thing, which at age fifteen is practically a social death sentence. But realizing her pitfalls doesn’t absolve her, as Colie comes to realize as she ventures into a summer that will soon change her life. This is no sugarcoated high school summer romance, where sun-kissed girls have already grown into their beauty and are ready to be swept away. No, Colie is still growing into herself, and the reader is invited to accompany her on her journey.

Colie is the kind of girl who never fits in. Having traveled with her mother across the country without settling down in one town for too long, she has never made any lasting

friendships. Not that she minds that; Colie is formerly overweight and is used to being bullied for her physique wherever she goes. Geography doesn't appear to alter the cruelty of other adolescents. Although Colie has since shed the weight, thanks to her perky fitness guru mother, she still possesses the same weak-willed and self-hating temperament. Despite her attempts to toughen up by dying her hair black and piercing her lip, Colie cannot escape her reputation or her bullies back home. While her mother is off touring Europe, Colie finds herself trapped at her quirky Aunt Mira's for the summer. Although Colie would gladly shut herself away from the world and spend the months listening to heavy metal alone, she soon finds that different plans await her. After getting a job working as a waitress with two young women-prickly Isabel and sweet but naïve Morgan-Colie discovers her true potential. As the summer passes along, Colie makes true friends, gains the self-confidence needed to stand up to her bullies, and maybe even falls in love.

Dessen, who has penned countless other books about teenage girls discovering themselves with a little help from family and friends, is skilled at portraying teenage angst in an empathetic light. Colie could be reduced to the stereotypical chubby goth girl, bickering with parental figures and isolating herself from any possible companionship. Yet, in Dessen's hands, Colie becomes a fully-fleshed young woman. She is as uncomfortable in her body as any teenage girl can be, and while that discomfort often comes out in the form of rudeness, Colie always maintains her sincere and compassionate heart. This is best revealed in the tender scenes with Colie and her eccentric aunt Mira, who is overweight and often the victim of jabs from snooty neighbors. Colie's metamorphosis runs alongside the lives of the two waitresses, Isabel and Morgan. Both Isabel and Morgan could be the protagonists of the novel, which is a testament to

Dessen's thoughtful and never one-note characterization. I found myself drawn to both women. While they were flawed, their hearts were always in the right place. I especially enjoyed how Dessen always highlighted the importance of female friendship over romance, a rarity in young adult literature. Although a romantic subplot exists between Colie and the kindhearted artist Norman, the real love story in *Keeping the Moon* is the lasting friendship formed between the three women. By the time the novel ended, I felt attached to these characters, as though I had been vacationing alongside them and enjoying their adventures too. It is a beautiful feeling to bond with fictional characters and truly miss them when the pages end. Like a song you have memorized every word of, you are forced to replay the melody in your head until you are finally ready to press play again and jump into that familiar but always welcome world once more.

Due to mild sexual content (the main character has a false reputation for being promiscuous) and some rough language, I would recommend this novel for teenagers ages 15 and up looking for an honest and heartfelt portrayal of growing up.

Book Recommendations

Take Me There by Susan Colasanti

The Book of Luke by Jenny O'Connell

On the Jellicoe Road by Melina Marchetta

Sloppy Firsts by Megan McCafferty