



Paint Me a Monster

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Rinnie Gardener's life looks like a perfect painting from the outside—a loving family and a beautiful house. But when the paint is stripped away, this dream dissolves to dust. Her parents divorce. Her father treats her like a stranger. Her mother, looming like a black cloud, treats her worse. Painful words become painful bruises. Rinnie's own body becomes a source of self-punishment.

Paint Me a Monster Details

Date : Published January 1st 2014 by Scarlet Voyage

ISBN : 9781623240189

Author : Janie Baskin

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Realistic Fiction, Young Adult, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction

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From Reader Review Paint Me a Monster for online ebook

Gothikarose says

It's an okay book. It takes a very long time to get interesting and once something interesting happens, it moves on. It's slow book and it can get very boring at times. It's not bad but it's not great.

Natalie says

The story that was trying to get across here was great, but it was poorly executed. The story jumped around a lot, which was confusing. It felt as if the author had just sat down, brainstormed a bunch of random scenes from this girl's life, and put them into a book without developing what happened in-between. Also, the beginning of the book was painfully boring. I almost didn't finish it.

Cindy Goodman says

A remarkable achievement for a first time novelist, Paint Me a Monster is a beautifully written work filled with vivid imagery and wrenching descriptions of a childhood filled with both joy and heartbreak. It's a story of survival which should inspire much needed dialogue about the consequences of abuse and divorce, including feelings of abandonment, issues with trust, and, most recently identified, a significant increase in the number of children diagnosed with eating disorders.

I highly recommend this book for individuals, book clubs, and mental health workers.

Liralen says

It took me a while to get into this, but when I got used to the style—short chapters, vignettes almost, that are chronological but not one A–Z storyline—it worked really, really well for me.

The book opens with Rinnie (about four years old) in 1958. Her family is wealthy; she is raised as much by the paid help as by her parents—but wealth does not insulate Rinnie from the world around her. Her mother, in particular, is desperately unhappy and, for reasons Rinnie cannot as a child understand, takes much of that unhappiness out on Rinnie.

The story sees Rinnie through elementary school, summers away at camp, middle school, high school. It's not her life story, but it is the story of her life to date, and those vignette-like chapters give an intense view into her changing understanding of herself and her family.

I did have a couple of questions about the timing—if the book opens in 1958, then much of it takes place in the 60s (with ends in the 50s and 70s), and a couple of things there gave me pause. Her parents divorce, for one, and while that's certainly not impossible for the timing, I was surprised that there wasn't more...well, social concern, I guess. Not necessarily in an overtly negative way, but divorce was more of a scandal then (or such is my understanding). There's also a scene in which Rinnie is reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It's a common book for English classes to read now, but it wasn't 'rediscovered' and treated as a

valuable text until the mid-1970s, and if Rinnie is reading this in grade 10 or so, that scene probably happens around 1969. Not that it *couldn't* have been assigned (and of course my math could be wrong; I don't have exact dates for the events in Rinnie's life), but it seems unlikely.

Still. Quibbles, those. More important that these are complex, flawed characters, all of whom have issues, but none of whom can be defined by those issues. If you'll permit me a bad metaphor, it's a full-body portrait rather than a headshot.

Author114 says

Just finished "Paint Me a Monster" and I thank the author for the experience.

Tolstoy said that all happy families are alike, but all unhappy families are unhappy in different ways.

And Rinnie's family is not only unhappy in a different way, but you vividly draw a picture of that acute pain of that different way. Rinnie's worries are a teenager's worries - Am I good enough? Am I loved? Am I wanted? Bad enough to handle these worries alone, but what if they are made worse by the people who say they love you? Mom is jealous of her daughter and the daughter is cut to the core by the monster that is her mother's sickness. In short chapters the author sensitively and dramatically shows the capacity for hurt family members can inflict on each other. Can any words be worse from a parent than "I've created a monster"? And to what extent is Rinnie's father responsible for her precarious state because of his own actions? Thank God Rinnie has her siblings.

Only with the help of Mr. Algrin and her experience in the pre-K class, does Rinnie begin to heal herself.

She needed to find herself because she was not herself, always trying to please others, stretching herself out until, she, too, became a monster unrecognizable to herself.

This book is fierce, honest and packs an emotional wallop. We get our self-worth from the portrait our parents paint for us, but what is that portrait is cracked and all wrong. Where and how do we find ourselves. The author takes us along for the healing journey.

This is not a depressing book by any means, but shows family life in a natural light, the good, the bad, the ugly. It is a novel many will be able to identify with and realize their own potential for greater growth.

Hilary says

Member of a picture perfect family, Rinnie (nicknamed after the Dog, Rin Tin Tin, in the movies) has always been the odd one out. Rinnie asks awkward questions, blurts out family secrets at inopportune times, and is the family scapegoat. Her family punishes her by yelling at her, ignoring her, and sending her away to camp. Neglected and unloved, Rinnie punishes herself by restricting her diet until she is skeletal (the family's skeleton in the closet?).

The reader will immediately understand that while Rinnie appears to be an average child of an upper middle class family, she is outcast. She makes mistakes common to childhood (but uncommon in her family, where appearances take precedence over substance). As a very young child, Rinnie stole a small charm from the department store. She told the Rabbi who came to dinner about the family's Christmas tree. She doesn't enjoy summer camp or shopping for clothes. Rinnie doesn't fit in.

Rinnie tries to reinvent herself to receive the love and attention she craves. She renames herself Rinnie, for the dog Rin Tin Tin, who is loved by all and is the symbol of universal approval. Rinnie (whose true name eventually is completely forgotten by all who know her) climbs the slippery slope of popularity, eventually becoming a cheerleader (generally the pinnacle of teen society). But it is to no avail. Rinnie's parents

divorce. Her father takes her brother with him to become part of his new happy family, and she and her sister are left to cope with their mother, who is on a downward spiral of alcoholism, mental illness, and messy relationships with a series of men and marriages. Her sister escapes through schoolwork and trips abroad. She knows how dreadful her mother has become, and yet she abandons her younger sibling to save herself.

Rinnie and her mother clash. Rinnie is helpless to save her mother from self-destruction and desperate to win any sign of approval from the parent left to her. As her mother sinks further and further into depression, she lashes out with increasing viciousness at Rinnie. In an era when mental illness went largely untreated and was politely ignored, Rinnie becomes the caretaker of the person who should be taking care of her. Held to impossible standards, Rinnie retreats into anorexia. No one in her family circle seems to notice as Rinnie turns into a walking skeleton.

With the help of a school guidance counselor, Rinnie develops a support system and is gently drawn back from the brink of self-destruction. The road to complete recovery will be long, but Rinnie is armed with acute self-perception, and the reader comes away from the novel with the feeling that hers will be a successful journey.

Cheryl Bradley says

After her parents divorce, Rinnie's life becomes a living hell. Her brother chooses to live with her father while her older sister, Lizzie, sticks by her side. No matter what Rinnie does, she cannot please her mother whose actions toward her are abusive and cruel. She is treated differently from both her brother and sister and is told by her mother that with Rinnie, she "created a monster".

Rinnie looks for acceptance from others - a father who is there more for his step-family than his own daughter, her cold grandfather "Pop-Pop", her fun-loving grandmother Gaga, who loves Rinnie's mom, Rose, so much she is blind to Rose's faults.

In the end, Rinnie turns towards food as something in her chaotic life she can control as she sinks deeper into misery.

Rinnie must learn to accept herself as she is and write her own life, but does she have the strength to do it?

This is the first book I've read by this author, and I enjoyed the styles of writing and the short notes to self. I liked the book of questions but feel it was unnecessary to repeat all the questions in the book so many times.

Overall, I think this is a good book that delves into subjects such as self-acceptance, blame, shame, and past wrongs. Definitely a worthwhile read!

Dee Price says

2.5 stars

I really hate to give this book such a poor rating because Rinnie was such a well-developed character but this story needs work. To start off with, nothing and I mean NOTHING, happens within the first 200 pages of the book. I almost DNF's this book several times. The writing style is also choppy and sporadic. Rinnie's character is dealing with some very serious problems which include abuse, an eating disorder, and

abandonment issues but this disorganized plot does not adequately convey her story.

Jeffrey Gusfield says

After burying myself in *Paint Me A Monster*, I felt better about being human, which is the most I can say about any reading experience. Janie Baskin's Margo Gardener, a.k.a. "Rinnie," is a strepitous gem, brimming with introspective, childlike ideas and queries – the kind most of us can never verbalize with such startling recall and success. Rinnie is a living symbol and uber-adequate correspondent of her dysfunctional, middle-class American family. She represents the richly opportuned, but damaged little tykes in every clan – inspired by the promises of a secure, wonderful childhood, yet painfully daunted by the projected imperfections of their suffering elders.

Ms. Baskin has an enormously fresh, entertaining, and poetic ability to recall the confusions and questions of childhood at every age from four to sixteen. The enigmatic Rinnie, adopting her nickname from the perfect television dog Rin Tin Tin ("the smartest, fastest, strongest dog in the world"), has a step up on most of the other damaged kids in our society because she's a brilliant survivor, using her naturally creative intensity to assuage the widening chasm between her mother and herself. Constantly battling what she perceives of as her own faults, which are more illusory than truthful, suggested by her mother and grandfather, she refuses to give up the magic of her life. I trusted in her abilities to persevere from the beginning as she never relents and folds in the face of her parent's divorce and the ugly ramifications imposed on Rinnie and her siblings.

Written in present tense, Rinnie's journalistic immediacy has angst, joy, and real suspense. For every young person that ever doubted the efficacy of her own life – which includes just about every one of us – this book points readers in a direction of hope, with messages of catharsis, forgiveness, and the inevitable act of becoming. Rinnie asks herself a growing list of questions, mostly prompted by her mother's cruel invocation that "in you I created a monster." One of those probes posed by the compulsively artistic Rinnie is "When does art become art?" That one I can answer: Art is art when others judge it to be so. This book is art.

Merav says

I won this book in a Goodreads contest. I was a bit leery, as I've received giveaway book before, and some of them are really poorly written. Boy was I surprised when I cracked open "Paint Me a Monster"!

It's very skillfully written- I found myself immersed in the story almost immediately. Rinnie is a compelling character, and I think she will remind many people with their younger selves. I connected with her very early on. Her struggles felt like my struggles, her triumphs were my triumphs. The characters all feel very real. I feel this is due in part to the simple and deft way the author writes- she's not overly wordy in her descriptions, which in other books often backfires and makes the character less believable instead of more.

The book dragged a bit in the middle, but then quickly picked back up and I remained riveted till the end. If the description sounds interesting to you, I absolutely recommend it. Great job with this book, Ms. Baskin. I'm so glad I was able to read it, and I look forward to re-reading it again soon.

Jennifer says

Janie Baskin's *Paint Me a Monster* tells the story of Margo Gardner, whose self-chosen nickname, Rinnie, comes from watching Rin Tin Tin at age 3 and wanting to be "the smartest, fastest, strongest dog in the world." Baskin nails the innocence and curiosity of her young child narrator and just as strongly expands on Rinnie's questions and hopes as she ages through high school.

Despite an appearance of wealth and a stable family, all is not happy behind closed doors. Rinnie's parents divorce and her father remarries, spending most of his time with his new stepchildren although living only a mile away. When Rinnie's younger brother moves in with his father, Rinnie is left behind to live with her mother and older sister (their mother's version of the perfect daughter). Labeled a monster, Rinnie becomes the focus of her mother's abuse, both mental and physical. Rinnie's treatment by her mother shows that words can hurt as well or worse than physical beatings. Psychological wounds can take longer to heal and leave scars that aren't apparent, but run deep. Rinnie develops coping mechanisms and assigns herself the task of being perfect, as "Dad and Mom might want me then."

Rinnie also leans on strong relationships with her sister, the family housekeeper, and the cook to help her through her struggles. But it's her passion for art, combined with a caring school counselor, that brings Rinnie through the darkness.

Baskin's use of poetry, as well as Rinnie's *Little Book of Questions*, is a well-crafted way to share the inner workings of Rinnie's mind. "What is perfect? What is a personality? Is there a difference between a father and a dad?" All legitimate questions. The notes that Rinnie writes to herself detailing her ever-shrinking body, in addition to her strict rule about eating only items with three ingredients or less, is an interesting look into the psychology of eating disorders.

Paint me a Monster is a moving read that illustrates that you should never assume the happiness of others by mere public impressions. Readers will root for Rinnie as she struggles to define herself, make peace with her family and find happiness on her terms.

Kenzie Judd says

Personal Response

I would give this book three out of five stars. The author made the main character grow up too fast. It would skip ages. The book also said the main character's dad is an alcoholic, but it never appeared in the book.

Plot

The book started out with Rinnie being three years old and her baby brother, Evan, was just born. Rinnie was never allowed to go by her brother because her mom, Rose, did not want germs by Evan. Rinnie had two maids that took care of her when her dad and mom were gone. Verna, the first maid, would come by every morning to make the kids breakfast, get them dressed, and make sure they're not bored throughout the day. Marie was the second maid, she only came by at night to make sure the kids got dinner, ready for bed, and tidy things up at night. Rinnie never really saw her parents. Her dad was an attorney and her mom was out with friends or cheating on her husband. Rinnie never really got along with her parents and spent most of her time with her sister or went to her grandmas house. For the summer Rinnie always went to summer camp. She would write letters to her mom, but never got anything back unless she needed more essentials. When Rinnie was about 10, her parents got divorced and she lived with her mom. Rinnie was always getting in trouble for little things, like not bringing her mom coffee in the morning or waking her up before 11. Rinnies

sister Liz was never at home, she was always doing things for school or out with friends. Rinnie's brother, was never around either. At age 13, Evan was taken away by Child Services and went to live with his dad. Rose met a guy, but was only with him for his money. While away at summer camp, Rinnie got a letter from both of her parents saying they got remarried to different people. Rinnie always wondered why her parents did not invite her to their weddings. After coming back from summer camp, Rose was horrible. She would hit Rinnie, call her names, tell her things that made her cry. Liz was always there for Rinnie when the bad things started to happen. At age 14 Rose took Rinnie on a vacation. She only brought Rinnie along because she needed an excuse to go see her new boyfriend. Rinnie tried telling her grandparents about what was happening at home, but they said she should stop lying. Rinnie and Liz rarely saw their dad. When they went to his house, he always made plans with his wife. Rinnie and Liz did not get along with their step-siblings, because they were always gone when they visited. At age 16, Rinnie got her license and had a different boyfriend every month. Rinnie realized she did not want to be like her mom and stopped seeing boys for awhile. Age 16 was when Rinnie would go see a therapist. They talked about everything and that was when Rinnie got into painting. Her paintings would express how she felt and her therapist would make her talk about them. Close to Rinnies seventeenth birthday, Rose got cancer and was given six months to live. Rinnie stood by her side every day and rarely left the hospital. Liz told Rinnie to go home, but she would not listen. Before Rose died, she said horrible things to Rinnie like saying she wished she never had Rinnie. Rinnie did not care and stayed with Rose until her death. During the grieving time was when Rinnie stayed with her grandma and Liz. While staying there, Rinnies family realized that Rinnie was a "monster" because they did not understand Rinnie. Rinnie made a painting about all this and talked to her therapist. Liz and Rinnie talked about it and thought how their mom's death was bad, but also good. They would not have to deal with the abuse, screaming, and stealing. Rinnie accepted that she was a little different from her family and thought about becoming a teacher in the end.

Characters

The main character's name was Rinnie. She had green eyes and red hair. She was the middle child of three and her family always calls her a "monster". She came from a rich family and went to a private all girls school. Liz is Rinnies older sister. Liz was always there when Rinnie needs her. She had brown hair and brown eyes. Liz was super smart and always had an answer to anything. Evan was Rinnies younger brother. He had brown hair and green eyes. He went to an all boys private school. He lived with his dad, because he was taken away by Child Services for his mom's actions. Rose was Liz, Rinnie, and Evans mom. She smoked and drank a lot. She cared more about spending money and going out than being with her family. She did not have a job and used her rich dad's bank account. She was divorced and a horrible mom to her kids.

Setting

The setting took place in California from years 2003 to 2014. I think it was important that the book tells the years because it was a biography and a reader would need to know what's happening during those years.

Recommendation

I would recommend this book to guys and girls in middle and high school. The book had no harsh language and only one or two graphic parts. The book was an easy read and very easy to follow.

Heather says

This book deals with such heavy topics (abuse, eating disorder, abandonment) but the execution of it was not as good as it could have been. The beginning was too slow and I had to force myself to pick it back up after a week and a half of not touching it. I also was confused about where the story was even going because it felt like the story just kind of rambled in the beginning. The book in general was sort of like that: slow, slow, slow, something happened, slow, slow, something happened, slow, etc. I couldn't wait for the story to be

over, which is a shame, because I like said Rinnie's story is an important one.

The book is written in short chapters which range from a paragraph to a few pages and it reads almost like a diary of Rinnie's. Because it chronicles Rinnie's life as she grows up, it contributes to some of the rambling as some of the passages appear to be about nothing. I also kept struggling with the timeline and her age because of the way it was written; I kept questioning what time frame it was. I felt like some passages were thrown in just to show passing of time and it felt like a waste.

2-2.5/5: This book could have been a great read, but the execution was lacking.

Luthien says

Also on my blog, Luthien Reviews.

Warning: *This review (and novel) contain frank discussions of child abuse, mental illness, and eating disorders.*

“What would sixteen-year-old Rinnie say to that fear-struck four-year-old girl?”

“I guess I'd kneel down and hug her. And tell her, very softly, that she's not alone, that I'll protect her, that I won't leave her. I'd tell her everyone gets scared and that it's OK to cry. Crying is a way to call for help.”

Silence. “Rinnie,” Mr. Algrin whispers. “You are that little girl.”

Margo “Rinnie” Gardener is the middle child in an upper-middle-class family living in suburban Cincinnati. She leads a privileged life, growing up in a beautiful house wearing beautiful clothes—but as Rinnie gets older, her fairy tale world turns dark. Her parents divorce, her father drifts further and further away, and her mother takes everything out on Rinnie. As she struggles to cope with her changing reality, Rinnie turns inward until she seizes control of the only thing left in her power: her own body.

It took quite a while for *Paint Me a Monster* to grow on me, but grow it did.

I picked up this book hungry for another daughter-abused-by-her-mother story. (Where were these YA novels when I was sixteen?) It's a painful topic that's close to my heart, one I feel probably happens way more often than anyone wants to admit, but is seldom explored in fiction. I've written about my own experiences before.

At first, I was not a fan of *Monster's* simplistic, first-person present-tense style (the book begins when Rinnie is just three years old). I found the dialogue to be trite and unrealistic and almost painfully stilted.

But as the novel goes on and Rinnie grows up, my appreciation grew as well. The whole book is broken up into brief vignettes, most of which are just a page or a few pages long. These become pieces in the puzzle that makes up Rinnie's life (puzzles are a recurring image in the book, too), all jumbled and unclear either to Rinnie herself or to the reader until she begins piecing them together.

Rinnie is a perfectly ordinary, if somewhat spoiled, young girl who seems to lead a charmed life. But that life begins to crumble until eventually she herself starts to fall apart. Her father's neglect is obvious from the first, but her mother's abuse builds up over time until it is too constant and too harmful to ignore. Mothers, it

seems, are more apt to emotionally and psychologically manipulate and hurt their children than to physically harm them, and that's how Mrs. Gardener begins, grooming Rinnie for a life of low self-esteem and self-doubt.

In a store when Rinnie is five:

"I'm hungry," I say...

"Shh, I can't think when you whine, Rinnie." ...

I want to hold Mommy's hand, but it's lost under the pile of clothes. ...

"How much longer, Mommy? I want to go. I'm hungry."

"Hush."

...She doesn't feel my tugs on her coat, and when I pinch her ankle, her happy blouse smile is gone. The lines between her eyes frown.

"What is it you want? Can't you be still for a minute? All these pretty things to look at and you have to misbehave."

"I want to go. I'm hungry."

"Then go. Find a place to play over there," she points. (32)

When Rinnie is about nine:

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"My heart is sad," she says. ...

Water runs into the tub. "You have rabbit eyes, Mommy! They're pink! A bath will make you feel all better."

"Oh Rinnie, go away. Life is falling apart in here." (83)

When Rinnie is fourteen:

"Look, Mom, now you can have your coffee whenever you're ready. You don't have to wait for us to get it. There's sugar and cream and a little napkin, too," I say.

"OK, smarty-pants."

Here we go.

This isn't going to work. Mom's voice follows the back-and-forth rock of her head.

"I'm not ready for my coffee. I've only been up ten seconds. And by the time I get ready, the coffee will be cold. I want one of you girls to bring the coffee when I ask and check back fifteen minutes later. If the cup is empty, then it is time for the second cup. What's so hard about bringing me hot coffee? Two cups please." (162)

And on it goes, worse and worse until I felt frightened for Rinnie's safety. One of the worst incidents made me want to fling the book across the room because of the injustice of it all. (It also hit pretty close to home, because my mother sent me to anger management and to a therapist for being “difficult,” too, when *she's* the one that really needed those things.) Until she gets to high school, no adults—none with any power, at least—seem to be on Rinnie's side. Even her grandparents dismiss her stories and say she is “exaggerating” things. By then, though she still seems as happy and normal on the outside as ever, it's clear to the reader that Rinnie is coming undone at the seams. She fears that revealing the extent of her mother's abuse would constitute a betrayal, and sadly I empathized with her: being open about your mother's problems *can* feel like a betrayal, even when she's the one who's betrayed you by taking said problems out on you.

I ended up adoring Rinnie, and I rooted for her all the way. She was quirky, creative, and resilient, even at the worst of times, and she never played the victim. She symbolized hope.

Towards the end of the novel, the Gardeners' longtime maid, Verna, tells Rinnie that she “was a good little kid.” This butts heads with her mother's accusation: “*You were the bad seed.*” Mrs. Gardener filled Rinnie's head with such doubts over the years: that she was disobedient, bad, “a monster,” a “fat-ass,” a “slut.” But everyone else saw what Verna and the reader saw: “a good little kid” and an athletic, hard-working, studious young woman.

When you hear your whole life from your own mother that you're nothing but trouble, that you're a headache, that you make more work for her, it's difficult to be told (as I have been by other family members) that you were really just a good kid.

It's difficult to realize that your mother is projecting own fears and doubts and insecurities onto her child, as Rinnie slowly realizes hers is doing.

My heart ached for Rinnie—and, if I'm being honest, for myself.

The book delves into other issues as well, such as the impact divorce has on children and, specifically, eating disorders. It isn't a light or an easy read, though it is a quick one. I thought it worked quite well as a whole, though perhaps it could have been a bit longer and its ideas, more fully developed.

I would definitely recommend it.

Mark says

I'm not entirely sure what to think about this book. Baskin is really good at describing small details. The book is rife with observing the most ordinary of objects or emotions or actions and somehow making them new and refreshing.

Beyond that, the main character is really deep and complicated, and the ability to show her growth over many years propelled most of the book. Baskin is quite good at capturing the perspective of a girl at many different ages, and I definitely noticed the voice and perspective changing as she got older.

Where this book fell off for me was plot. It's shocking that in a book covering this many years of one person's life can have so little happen. Sure there are a few big moments, but they're inundated in minute observations and rambling commentary that they never really take hold or progress the story line. Sure, we can think of plot as the sort of female Bildungsroman, and the end does touch on a progression that is incredibly introspective and powerful, but there's just so much detail and philosophy and small little

moments that the book loses any solid arc or progression.

This read like a YA version of the "Great Russian Authors," but it's hard to make that style of writing work in this setting with this audience. You don't have 800 pages and readers who are incredibly vested in seeing the minutiae, and so I think some of the power that made this book interesting was lost in the approach.

Still worth a read if you want to learn how not to parent or if you like philosophical, introspective books about the growth of a female, but be fair warned that this book will not be a page turner in terms of a lot of stuff happening (though it is a page turner in that most chapters are like, two pages, so there's that).
